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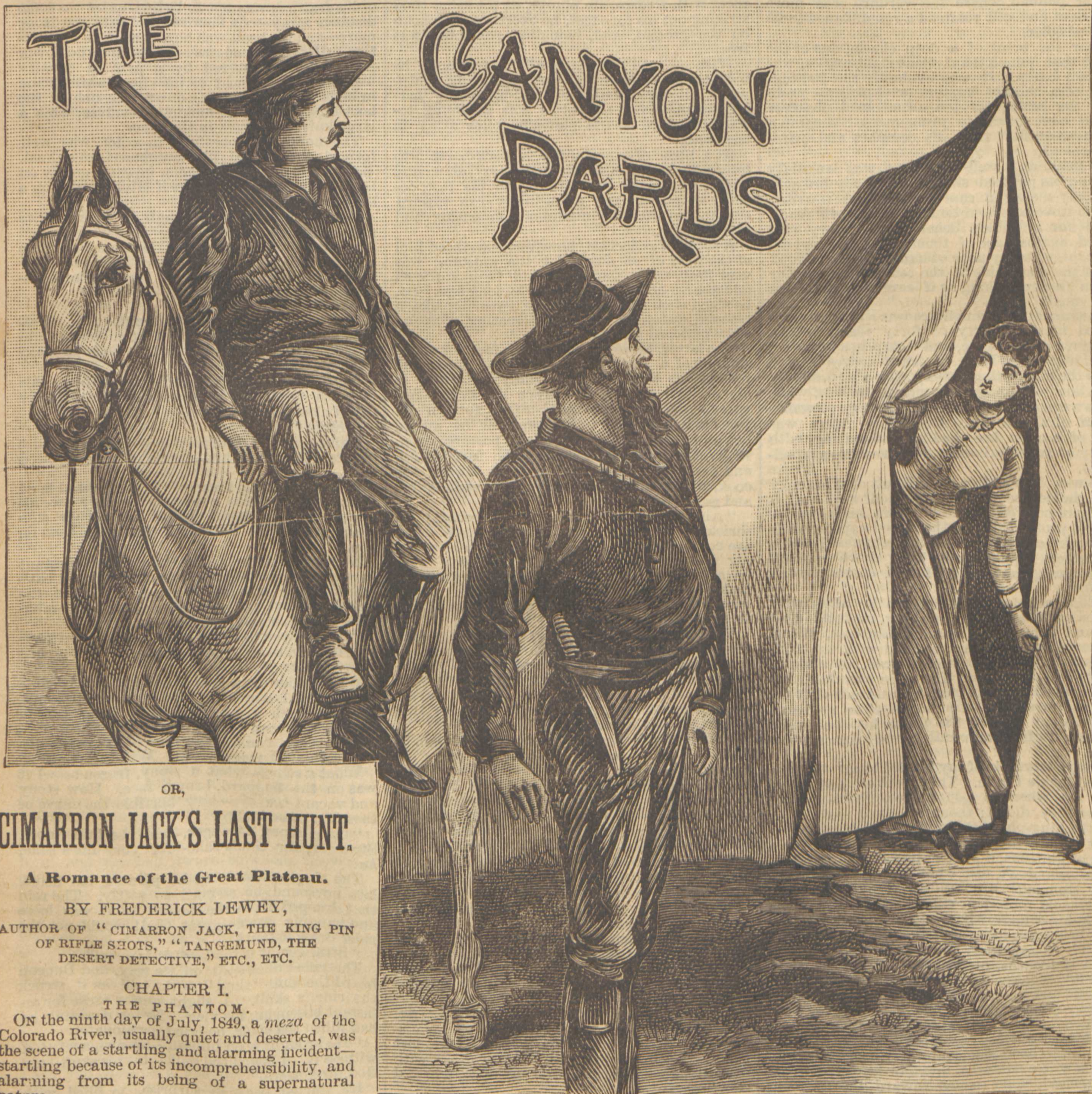
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OR,
CIMARRON JACK'S LAST HUNT.

A Romance of the Great Plateau.

BY FREDERICK DEWEY,
AUTHOR OF "CIMARRON JACK, THE KING PIN
OF RIFLE SHOTS," "TANGEMUND, THE
DESERT DETECTIVE," ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

THE PHANTOM.

ON the ninth day of July, 1849, a meza of the Colorado River, usually quiet and deserted, was the scene of a startling and alarming incident—startling because of its incomprehensibility, and alarming from its being of a supernatural nature.

Lest the contemporaneous and consequently practical listener, should smile with modern

AS HE WAS ABOUT TO DISMOUNT, A SLIGHT RUSTLE OCCURRED WITHIN, AND A GOLDEN HEAD PEEPED FORTH, LIGHTED BY THE BRIGHTEST, MOST TIMID, AND SOFTEST BLUE EYES JACK HAD EVER SEEN.

scorn at the simplicity of the idea "supernatural," let me state here and now that the incident was witnessed by a confirmed skeptic, one of the most doubting and incredulous of practical men. He was also a party to it; at first doubting, then perplexed, and lastly a thoroughly scared man.

It was high noon on the *meza* of the Colorado—high and dry, for it was the summer solstice and the middle of the dry season. Away over the flat table-lands adjoining the river canyon, the heat rose in shivering liquid waves from the dried and baked earth. Heat—drought! two fit companions, and the invariable frequenters of the Colorado River plateaus.

The ravine-traversed *meza* (table) contiguous to the main canyon, was devoid of verdure, save here and there, where grew stunted and isolated clumps of the wild sage. So scanty in its foliage, so bare in its desolation that even its most constant frequenter could find no shelter under it—the gigantic hare—the "jack-rabbit." With the exception of this sage-brush the *meza* was bare and yellow, miles from human haunts, quiet and ghostly—a deserted land. It was a dreary place and its numerous frightful chasms only served to make its dreariness more apparent; the only redeeming feature in the whole landscape for miles, being a distant and higher plateau where the verdure was more luxuriant and still retained a resemblance to its natural color.

Near the brink of a deep chasm, one of the many that joined the river at right-angles, was a small camp. It was evidently the halting-place of a band of hunters or explorers—probably the latter, for the accustomed observer would have instantly pronounced the camp a "fatigue-outfit" from its compact and sparse dimensions.

A small and well-worn tent was languidly flapping its patched sides in the steady breeze—the only shelter in case of inclement weather. Beside it were several bundles of blankets ready baled for a sudden decamp; a solitary rifle leaned against one of them; a saddle and accompaniments lay near at hand, while scattered about the shady side of the tent were a number of tin dishes, looking as if carelessly arranged for a meal.

Bustling about a small fire was a short, sandy-haired man of thirty or forty years, with a meager, bronzed face, and sharp gray eyes set close together. With his shirt-sleeves turned up to the elbow, thereby exposing a lean, skinny arm, but well-lined with muscle, he was, while endeavoring to coax the fire, the very personification of fretfulness. His whole aspect was that of a man keen and discriminating, with plenty of practical sense, but over given to sulkeness.

He was dressed in a ragged suit of Kentucky jeans, the nether portions of which were considerably in need of repair—so were his boots, for his toes protruded from the ripped uppers; while his shock head was crowned by a tattered slouch hat, which flapped annoyingly down over his eyes, causing a running fire of curses the day through.

While occupied about the fire he alternately eyed a vicious-looking mustang, picketed close by, and kept up a running soliloquy, which, muttered and indistinct, coupled with the fretful tone in which it was uttered, proclaimed finally his disposition. His voice was sharp and querulous; his words more so: and as he left the fire, and mounting an eminence close at hand, looked away toward the north, his tone grew sharper, his face more bitter, and his words ran thus:

"Oh, every hair of my blasted head! What a cursed pickle I'm in. They went off and never told me when to get dinner. Told me?—of course they didn't; though I axed Pedro, and he's the king-pin of the hull outfit. Oh, calamity, what a life, what a life! to cook and slave for a pack of gluttons, a pack of lazy, strolling vagabonds, who don't keer what happens to me long's their stomachs are full of meat and drink. Eh, you old fool—you villain—what d'ye mean thar?—hi—whoa—whoa—stop, I say! oh, my eyes, he'll bust loose, and then whar *won't* he run to? Whoa, thar, you ugly brute."

The last words, uttered in a still shriller tone, were addressed to a vicious mustang, which was dancing and tugging at the entire length of the picket-ropes with fierce pulls, which threatened to uproot the small stake to which it was secured. As every successive jerk caused the frail pin to bend and strain, the cook, Kit Duncan, saw it would soon break or be drawn from the ground, so he darted toward the mustang and seized him by the nose, at the same time kicking him violently.

Then commenced a fierce struggle. The mustang was equally wrong-headed and obstinate, and kicked, plunged and squealed as only a mustang can; while Duncan, tightly clinching his nostrils, held firmly, at the same time kicking the beast violently.

The mustang was active, and struck out sharply at the cook with his fore-feet, striving, as he did so, to tear away from the latter's clutch; but Duncan held tightly, and had it not been for an incident which occurred in the brute's favor would have gained the victory. The mustang, during the brief struggle, had not for a moment ceased to pull hard on the picket-rope, in wild attempts to break away; and the stake, slender and frail, incapable of enduring the strain, at length bent, wavered, and finally snapped.

Now the furious beast, freed from the confining rope, plunged still more violently, and danced about, taking Duncan entirely off his feet; and the latter, feeling his fingers grow numb under their tight grip, became frantic at the thought that he must soon lose his hold. Apparently, the mustang perceived the lessening grip upon his nose, for, with a vindictive squeal, he braced himself for a final effort. Lowering his body until his belly nearly touched the ground, he stood motionless for a moment; then, with a desperate plunge, at the same time striking out his fore-feet, he overturned Duncan on the ground, and, bounding past him, was free!

With a shrill "whiger" of triumph, he bounded away from the camp, heading southward; disgusted with the dried-up scanty herbage of the river *mezas*, he was galloping toward the more fertile plateaus, miles away in the south.

At a little distance away, a pack-horse was tethered—an old Spanish mare, lazy, slow and stolid; and as the cook sprang to his feet, decided to pursue, and accordingly ran toward this animal with the intention of mounting and giving chase.

A second's reflection, however, convinced him of the folly of so doing, for the mustang was very fleet, while the mare had been stiffened and abandoned as a saddle-horse, long ago. So, he stood with an inflamed face, swearing like a trooper, watching the fast-retreating mustang as he galloped away.

The latter, however, did not go far; for at the summit of a small knoll he halted short, and tossing his head, neighed wildly, evidently in alarm, then turned to retrace his steps. Apparently he saw some fantastic or foreign object, which caused him alarm, for he waited but an instant in his irresolute posture; then, with another and shriller neigh, he turned tail, and came galloping swiftly back toward the cook, who watched him now with satisfaction and glee.

"Ah, you ugly bunch of devilment!" he shrieked. "You see the boys, do you? They are coming, are they? Ah-ha, my bird—so-ho, my beauty! The Spaniard's lass' will soon be around your neck, and then—I guess I'll make a big club out of the tent-pole. Hello! what's the matter with you, now? What's got into the old mare?"

Withdrawing his gaze from the fleeing mustang, he bent his eyes upon the pack-mare in wonder; for the stolid animal, generally half-asleep, and not easily excited, was now with erect head, and pricked-up ears, intently staring at some invisible object, probably the one that had frightened the mustang.

"Something's wrong!" muttered Duncan, as he watched the mare. "Injuns, p'raps. If 'twas the boys coming back, the mustang'd have known 'em; so 'd the mare. And, by thunder! if 'twas the boys they wouldn't be coming from that direction—they would come from just the opposite—due north. No, it can't be the boys—it's some one else. I guess I'll hide for a bit."

In the heart of a hostile Indian country, it was the wisest thing to be done under the circumstances; and without further surmising, he took the rifle from its stand by the blankets, and glided into the tent.

There was a rent in the canvas on the south side. Creeping to this, he peered out, having a range of vision which commanded the whole southern plain, and waited for the appearance of the (as he supposed) invisible enemy.

Nothing strange was in sight. The mustang, with flying mane and tail, galloped by, and disappeared from his limited vision. Next, just over the knoll, a solitary bird of prey arose, with discordant screams, and soaring aloft, wheeled slowly away.

He waited five minutes, nothing came to view from the hill-top. He grew uneasy—it was so

quiet. He waited several minutes more. Then, growing surprised, left the tent and walked out into the plain.

The mustang, recovering from his temporary fright had forgotten his original design of flight, and had halted northward a half mile, where he was calmly grazing. The mare, too, had resumed her grass; and a little ashamed at being so easily alarmed, Duncan shouldered the rifle and walked away toward the hill.

He had not gone over one hundred yards, and was about half-way to the base of the hill, when a horseman came suddenly into view, riding over the summit. In a hostile country, Duncan's first act was to cover the stranger with his rifle.

Had the latter made any warlike demonstrations, he would have been in extreme danger of his life, for the cook would have fired, and as he was an old Kentucky squirrel-hunter, was a good shot; but the man rode directly toward Duncan, who, on his guard, still covered him.

Duncan's sharp eye noted the stranger. He was a tall, thin man, dressed plainly, as he could see a neutral-colored garment beneath the Mexican *poncha* he wore cast over his shoulders. His face was that of a dark-skinned man, and was partially hidden by a glazed sombrero which slouched down over it. A minute examination of his features was not to be had, as he was some distance away—one hundred and fifty yards or more—and his head was bowed as if in abstraction. His pantaloons were dark, and the lower portions were covered by a pair of cavalry boots, which reached to his knees, terminating in huge flaps which hung down. In one of the boot-legs was a silver-mounted revolver, while a large knife was stuck in the other.

The horse was chestnut in color, was well formed, and looked like an American animal. Without showing any alarm, he came gently on in a slow trot, appearing as if lately ridden on a long journey.

Duncan felt uneasy, though he was a brave man and knew no fear, being unsuspicious and extremely skeptical; but, as the horseman rode silently down the hill toward him, and drew nearer, he resolved to keep him at a safe distance, and, raising his voice, called:

"Hello!"

No answer; and what was stranger, the horseman still hung his head. Was he so deep in abstraction that he had failed to hear the hail? Undoubtedly.

So reasoned Duncan, and though from this fact his suspicions in some degree abated, he called again, still louder:

"Hello!"

Still no answer, still no movement on the part of the rider; still the chestnut horse trotted on.

"Stranger," and Duncan's finger pressed hard the trigger, "this is a hostile country—we allow no trickery here. Either answer or stop where you are, or I'll shoot. I've got a bead on you."

No movement yet. The trot of the chestnut horse was still continued. On the slouched hat's brim slightly moving, Duncan remarked the rider's eye was vacant like that of a somnambulist—vacant, staring, and socket-fixed.

"P'raps you didn't hear me, stranger; maybe you didn't—so, once again, and for the last time—HELLO!"

As the rider drew nearer and his face became less shaded, a scowl was visible on his face, and, heavens—such a scowl! It seemed as if cast in bronze. Duncan's face grew stern.

"Stranger, you are less than fifty yards distant. I've got you covered. Will you stop?"

What a scowl—what a stony, frozen scowl it was on the haggard, brown face. How stony and vacant the eye—how horrible the curve of those dark-brown lips.

"Once more, stranger, and the bullet goes. Stranger, for God's sake—for your life's sake, halt!"

The chestnut horse, as he planted his hoofs, left no sound, he stepped so softly. The rein that drooped from the brown hand was loose and hanging down—great God! would not the rider draw it taut?

"Stranger, it is the last—it is over!"

The rifle-bullet sped on its way, and Duncan heard the dull "thud" of the ball as it struck the rider's skull. A slight smoke arose for an instant obscuring his view. Never doubting he had killed the rider, he cried, passionately:

"He brought it on himself—his own act! God witness it. I heard the bullet hit his skull—my God, look there!"

He started back in surprise, so filled with wonder he was speechless, as he saw the chestnut horse still advancing close upon him, and

the rider still erect in his seat. Still the head hung down, still the lean hand held the loose rein, still the horse kept on, within a few feet of the bewildered Kentuckian.

Staggering back, Duncan, now alarmed—his courage almost vanished—clubbed his rifle, and struck dumb with amazement and alarm, mechanically waved it as if to strike.

The horse stopped, then walked slowly circling round Duncan, watching him with his steady brown eye, as if guided by some invisible hand. Still the rider, with his head bowed steadily, kept his saddle, like one in a trance. The lean, brown hand that held the loose rein still rested on the saddle-horn, as the horse turned again and quietly trotted back, retracing his steps.

The trot increased to a gallop; it grew into a smart run as he bounded up the hillside; and at last, flying into a cloud of dust, he disappeared over the summit with great velocity, with the quiet rider still bestriding him, yet erect, and never once raising his bent head to look back.

The dust settled down again, and the cook, filled with awe, stood watching the hill-top.

A shout drew his attention to the camp. Three horsemen were there, two of them in the act of dismounting, while the third, a large man on a powerful black horse, was bringing in a stray mustang at the end of a long *riata* or lasso.

"They've come at last, thank God!" uttered Duncan, as he walked toward the camp, not without glancing fearfully back over his shoulder. "Great Heaven! he never dropped, and I'm a dead shot, and I heard the bullet strike his skull!"

CHAPTER II.

A SLIGHT MISUNDERSTANDING.

WHEN Duncan returned to the camp, he found his three companions talking excitedly, with gestures of annoyance. Their faces, too, were clouded and gloomy—evidently they were not in the best of humor.

The principal and loudest talker was a young man of six feet three in height, fantastically dressed, and was engaged in removing the saddle from his horse, a beautiful blood-bay. He was addressing no one in particular, but savagely tugging at his saddle-girth, was in high ill-humor. The next man was a brownish, wiry fellow of forty years or more, dressed roughly in buckskin, and was standing with his arm thrown over the neck of his roan mustang, idly tearing the soil with one of his huge spurs.

Both of these men were well known throughout the Southwest, being famous in their several "lines." The young giant, Cimarron Jack, was noted for his enormous strength, reckless daring, cunning strategy, and inordinate bragging. The other was still wider known, being none other than the far-famed Simpson—"Tim Simpson, the Guide."

The third was a Spaniard or Mexican, tall, sturdy, and weatherbeaten. He, too, was of great courage, strength and ability—a fitting companion for such men as Cimarron Jack and Simpson. He was a Spanish *vaquero*, and well known to most of our readers—Pedro Felipe.*

"I never saw such a fellow!" angrily growled the giant explorer. "The laziest, most careless lout in the country. He don't care how tired we are—how hungry and fatigued—not he! All he looks out for is himself. Now, here we are, after riding in the hot sun all the morning, back to camp long after noon, to find the coffee boiled away, that tender antelope-steak burned to a cinder, and the cook off hunting jack-rabbits. Curse such a cook! he a cook—ha! ha!" and Cimarron Jack laughed scornfully.

Though these sarcastic remarks were addressed to his saddle, which he flung angrily down, Duncan, being quite close, overheard every word, and was well aware to whom they were addressed. He flared up instantly.

"Think I'm a fool, a slave, d'ye? Yes, I'm a fool for ever cooking for such a miserable set, and in doing it I am also a slave. You growl because you come back and don't find your slave ready with the dinner, do you? Now after those remarks of yours you can just cook your dinner yourself, for I won't! Just put that in your pipe and smoke it, will you?"

"What in thunder is the use in gittin' mad?" cried the guide, himself very surly. "There you are on the pararer huntin' jack-rabbits, while the dinner, left to itself, spoils, of course. Then you come back and growl, 'cause we find fault, when you are to blame. Curse the jack-rabbits! who wants any jack-rabbits?"

* See HALF DIME LIBRARY No. 313.

"Who's been hunting jack-rabbits, I'd like to know?"

"You!"

"I hain't!"

"You hev! we all see'd you with yer gun."

"What if you did? was it any of your business?"

"Senors, senors, keep cool—preserve your tempers," and the burly form of Pedro Felipe interposed between the angry disputants. "What! men of your age and sense stooping to indulge in a petty wrangle like children? Senors, I am truly ashamed. Come, now, don't quarrel; I am sure Duncan had some good cause to leave the dinner. This is a wild country, you know, and I, for one, will not grumble. Come, all bear a hand, and we'll soon have a rough dinner, and then Duncan will explain, I am sure he will. Depend upon it, Tim Duncan is too careful and faithful to leave a dinner to spoil for the sake of a paltry rabbit—he has a satisfactory explanation in reserve I'll guarantee. Hurrah! now for dinner."

His good nature and brusque heartiness were contagious. At once forgetting their idle dispute, the guide and Duncan advanced and shook hands, with faces of a deeper color than usual; while Cimarron Jack, lustily roaring a rollicking negro melody, rolled up his sleeves, preparing for a new and better dinner.

Pedro went back to unsaddle his black horse and repicket the skittish mustang, while the guide heaped more wood on the fire, Duncan pounded coffee, and Jack sliced off juicy steaks of antelope—dinner was "under way."

The repast was discussed amicably, the disputants, like other wranglers, being very obliging and social after their quarrel. Jack and Simpson related reminiscences of their "green-horn" days, and lustily roared snatches of uncouth songs; but sharp-eyed Pedro, watching Duncan, noticed him glance frequently over his shoulder at the knoll, as if in expectation of seeing some disagreeable object; and, satisfied the latter had a story to relate which would satisfactorily explain his neglect of the dinner, resolved to question him at the first opportunity.

He had not long to wait, for the cook being sadly perplexed, voluntarily explained.

When the last man had eaten his fill, and charging his pipe, lazily stretched himself in the tent's scanty shade, he faced them all, and said:

"We are here to explore Long and Black Canyon on the Colorado River, ain't we?"

Jack sleepily nodded assent.

"And we have got plenty of time to do it in?"

"Plenty."

"Just so. Well, I had a visitor this mornin'."

Pedro knew the explanation was coming.

"A visitor—whom?" he quietly asked.

"A dead man."

"A dead what?"

"A dead man!"

"Nonsense!"

"Upon my life and soul as I ever hope for mercy—either a dead man or an iron one."

Jack and the guide aroused themselves, and sitting upright, eyed Duncan with interest, looking incredulous. The latter proceeded.

"Why, you saw him yourselves."

"We saw no man," quietly replied Pedro.

"You must have been blind, then—didn't you hear me shoot?"

"No."

"Thunder! it wasn't five minutes after I shot, when you fellers hollered to me from the camp, here."

"Where were you then?"

"Over yonder, about half-way to that hill. You must have been asleep or you'd have seen him ride over the summit. Gracious! how that horse did fly."

"What horse—what are you talkin' about?" demanded the guide, impatiently.

"Why, that tall dark man on the chestnut horse that rode over the hill just before you hollered."

"Senor, we saw you three miles away. All the while we were coming that distance, (and we rode slowly) you never changed your position, but stood perfectly still. We wondered then what you were doing—when we came near enough to distinguish your rifle, we supposed that you were out after rabbits."

"You say—you saw me—for—three miles—and I stood—still all—the time?"

"Yes; you did."

"Then, instead of standing there a minute, I stood an hour. No wonder the dinner spoilt."

"You were motionless half an hour, certainly—quite still, leaning on your gun, looking toward the hill."

"I stood there for an hour—that's a fact!" and without further preamble he related the incident, in his honest, straightforward way, from beginning to end, while they listened attentively.

He finished and sat down, lighting his pipe. Jack whistled softly, and thoughtfully walked to a small keg attached to the pack-saddle, containing whiskey. Taking a small stick, he thrust through the bung, and then withdrawing it, measured the depth of the liquor. Then he turned to his companions:

"It takes a quart to make cook so drunk he don't know what he's about—a quart or pretty near it. There's been no liquor drawn since morning. So he's been sober, and as he never spins yarns nor lies, what he says is so; he hit a tall man on a chestnut horse, square in the head with a rifle-ball at twenty-five yards, and it didn't drop him. Gentlemen of the jury, he was either a spirit, a dead man, or an iron one; no wonder the dinner spoiled."

An interval of silence ensued, during which the four men smoked and eyed each other quietly; then Simpson spoke:

"That thar cook is a skeptic ef thar ever were one—he's got ter see and know—yes, *know*, a thing afore he believes it. He saays he see'd a dead man or a spirrit, and saays he hit him in the head with a bullet, and it didn't hurt him. Gents, the cook never lies nor spins yarns—he tells the truth."

Duncan was honest, careful, and certain in his speech—he was a man whose word could be relied upon under any circumstances; and they never doubted the truth of his statement.

"Well," said Cimarron, after a long pause, "shall we postpone the exploration and ferret out this cock-and-bull chap? It will be some excitement, and this business is devilish dull. What do you say—shall we do it?"

Every man promptly assented.

"Correct, my lion-hearted minion! 'Well begun is half-done;' shall we begin now?—no time like the present!"

"Yes," was the unanimous cry.

"All right. The moon shines all night tonight—we can search until we are tired. Tear my ten-ton heart out, but I'm starving to meet that chap. Hurrah! Saddle up! I'm the cock of the walk!"

So saying, he walked to his saddle and placed it on his blood-bay's back. The rest followed suit, and soon four horses were ready to start. The fractious mustang was to be ridden by Simpson, as the cook, being a poor rider, would have been "bucked" off the moment he bestrode the malicious beast; and the guide's roan mustang was always ridden by Duncan on a march.

Pedro and the cook were to follow, as nearly as possible, the direction taken by the mysterious rider, all returning to the camp as a rendezvous.

The country being unusually quiet, it was not deemed necessary to leave the camp under other guard than that of the old Spanish mare; and after closely scanning the horizon in all directions, they rode away, the two parties separating at the start. In ten minutes the mare was the only living creature in camp.

Ten minutes more, but two horsemen could be seen on the plain; the guide and Jack having disappeared down a canyon.

About three hours before sunset, the figure of a woman appeared on the summit of a distant hill. Seeing the camp, she uttered a cry of joy, and hastened toward it, as if seeking a refuge.

Panting with her haste, she flew by the mare, and with a glad, but pale and worn face, entered the tent.

The afternoon went on toward sunset.

CHAPTER III.

A FRUITLESS VALLEY.

At an hour before sunset, Pedro and Duncan reined in their horses on the border of a dense chaparral, nearly six miles from camp, and close to a lofty hill. This eminence was broken and rough, bearing evident traces of a volcanic formation, and was almost entirely covered with thick bushes, which, vividly green, presented a strong contrast to the surrounding yellow and verdureless country. At the base of the hill, as on the extreme summit, there were no thickets—at the former, a natural "clearing" extended in a circle entirely around it. This, however, the two men could not see, as the dense intervening bushes effectually hid it from view.

"Well," observed the Spaniard, after briefly gazing at the lonely, silent hill, "so far, so good; we have as yet failed to get a glimpse of this strange prowler. We have seen no trail—he left none; but, Senor Duncan, unless the ex-

perience of twenty-five years as a *vaquero* plays me false, the object we are seeking is even now in yonder chaparral."

"Do you think so?" hastily inquired Duncan, somewhat startled at finding his companion's views brought him into such propinquity with the mysterious rider. "And if he is, Pedro, shall we enter? What are your reasons for thinking he's here?"

"Doubtless just ones, *senor*. In the first place, though I doubt it, the man may be dead; but, whether or no, his horse is not, for you, with your own eyes, saw him gallop away. What more natural than a horse, if left to himself (as he undoubtedly was), should head at once for comforts—good feed, cool water and shelter from the sun? A horse *will* go to such a place; and such a place is this, the only one for miles around."

"You ain't a fool, Pedro, if you do have a dark skin and a foreign accent; but how do you know there's water here? I can't see any."

"I smell the water, *senor*—or rather the *mezquit*, which has a strong odor when soaking."

"Pedro, you are smart."

"I know it; it is not to my credit, however, beyond observing. Just the cleverness which experience always brings to the observant. Just as I believe if a man is born godly, with no bad qualities, if he lives religiously all his life, he is no better than a knave, if the latter was born with evil traits. To a man naturally good, it is no credit to live good; but if he struggles to live better, he is entitled to great credit, and is in reality a better man than the one who lives religiously because it is his nature to do so."

"That's a strange doctrine, Pedro—Hollo! looky yender."

And Duncan hastily pointing toward the summit of the hill, in a loud tone uttered the concluding words:

"Bu'st every buttonhole in my coat, but *thar* he is!"

Pedro looked up quickly. A dark form, clearly outlined against the dark blue of the evening sky, was on the bare and yellow summit—the figure of a tall, slender man on a chestnut horse—the form of the Rider.

As several hours before, the head hung down, and the glazed sombrero flapped over his face in the lazily-floating north breeze. His side was toward them, and his straight black hair straggled out from his hat over the brown neck, glistening uncannily. Across the horn of the saddle, the dark, lean hand still hung, lightly clasping the loose bridle-rein, and his other arm was akimbo. In all respects, he was the same as he had appeared to Duncan.

The head and neck of the chestnut horse drooped downward, and one of the hind-legs was drawn up, the tip of the hoof barely touching the ground. His whole attitude was that of a tired animal. Quietly he gazed at the two men below, in the chaparral—steadily, yet coldly, as if wholly unconcerned. But he kept his fixed gaze upon them, as if, being wholly at leisure, he had nothing to fix his attention and had allowed it to wander vagrantly on them.

Both horse and rider were motionless.

How they had come into view upon the summit without being discovered in the ascent, was a question the *cavalleros* below could not answer, and it mystified them. But there he was, anyhow, and that was sufficient.

Pedro unslung his rifle, a long symmetrical weapon, which he used very skillfully. Duncan raised the hammer of his Kentucky smooth-bore.

"Are you sure he is the same, *Senor* Duncan?" whispered Pedro.

"The same."

Pedro, casting a searching glance at the cook, was satisfied the form on the summit was the one they were seeking. He spoke, softly:

"Take aim at his head, *Senor* Duncan, while I cover his heart. We are both crack shots—can it be possible we will fail to roll him from his saddle?"

Duncan, after attempting it once, very much doubted their ability to do it, but said nothing.

"I will count three," resumed Pedro; "one!"

Simultaneously the long rifles were raised—their bearers settled themselves in their saddles.

"Two!"

Four eyes gleamed over four sights, two of which were covering the drooping head above, while the others were on a dead line with the heart under the dark poncho.

"Three!"

The rifles cracked as one. They hastily lowered them and peered through the smoke at the summit.

There sat the Rider, motionless in his saddle. Perhaps the chestnut horse pricked up his ears and tossed his head a trifle at the guns' re-

port—perhaps he did, very slightly; but when the filmy vapor dissipated, his head and neck still drooped, and his hind leg remained lazily drawn up, as he still watched the men below.

It was a harmless volley.

Duncan glanced at Pedro. Across the swarthy face gleamed a dark-crimson glow; the blood of the Spaniard was up. Yet his voice was clear and cool as ever, and his features were calm as he quietly said:

"*Senor*, the gun is not my favorite weapon. We will try the *riata*—we will give him the lasso."

As he spoke, from his saddle-horn he took the coil of twisted hide which depended therefrom. Settling its nether end yet more firmly around the pommel, he took the coil in his right hand and slid the running noose.

Then he turned to Duncan, who uneasily watched him, every second or so casting a swift glance at the motionless pair on the summit.

"*Senor*, are you ready? If so we will go."

Duncan nodded assent.

Pedro raised his bridle-rein. At the well-understood signal the black horse started toward the hill in his customary swift walk. Just before them a clump of dense bushes lay in their path, towering above their heads. To pass, they were forced to go around them, and accordingly they made the circuit.

For the space of not more than five seconds the summit of the hill was concealed from view—barely five seconds, not more; but when they rounded the chaparral and came into view of the summit, they at once drew their steeds in sharply, and an oath escaped Duncan.

The summit was bare!

CHAPTER IV.

PEDRO TALKS SPANISH.

"*SENOR*, I say! where has he gone?" excitedly cried the Spaniard, with a passionate gesture.

He asked a useless question; the cook knew no more about it than he himself.

For a moment only Pedro Felipe remained transfixed with amazement, mingled with vague, superstitious fear; then his Spanish blood boiled, and for the first and last time in his life he made use of an American oath, and drawing a beautiful dagger, he brandished it toward the frowning hill. His black eyes, it seemed to Duncan, shot electric sparks from their raven depths; his heavy eyebrows lowered savagely over them; and in a mixed jargon of Spanish and English he roundly declared he would triumph over the strange horseman or die in the attempt.

"Duncan," he cried, "you ride to the left, round the hill. I'll ride on and meet you on the other side. Load your gun before you start. Stay—do you see that lofty tree yonder, on the plain?"

"Yes; it's on the other side of the hill, a mile away."

"Yes. When you get opposite it, halt in some open place and wait for me. We must not let him escape us. Till we meet *adios*."

The Spaniard's spur gently grated the black horse's flanks as the noble animal, with his rider disappeared in the chaparral. Duncan, greatly excited, struck the spur sharply into the roan mustang, which obeyed the command, and at a smart gallop darted away to the left.

The cook, dodging the overhanging branches as he swept along, abandoned himself to speculation in regard to the mysterious horseman. What was, he demanded, who was, where was this extraordinary rambler—this unconquerable shadow that haunted him, and whom it was impossible to slay? At the word "slay" he immediately dived into his logic, and, as usual with such divers, came out sputtering, with closed eyes. Once had his bullet struck his skull—he had heard it; twice as many bullets must have entered his body while on the summit, for he was a crack shot, and Pedro rarely missed his aim. Why did he not fall? If he was lifeless, the law of gravitation would have compelled that, if he had not been held to his saddle by invisible means. If he *had been* alive, he must surely be dead now; if he was dead he *was* dead, and that settled it; and if he was neither dead nor alive, he was a spirit—a ghost. If he had been alive, he would have fallen from his horse when struck in the head with the first bullet, as he surely was; if he had been dead, he would not have been on the horse; so he was neither dead nor alive, consequently he was a phantom.

So deduced Duncan from his argument.

"I ain't excited," (which was untrue), he cried; "I ain't scared," (which was the truth)—"I ain't drunk or crazy. I'm in my right mind."

And, by thunder, I've come to a conclusion I'll stick to: the man is a ghost."

He increased his gallop to a sharp run as he entered a flowery, beautiful glade of an acre or so in extent. Bordering the glade on the opposite side rose a dense, nearly impenetrable chaparral, a dozen feet in height; and, looking about him for an opportunity to enter, he drew the mustang in slightly, when the animal, without warning, suddenly sheered aside, unseating his unpracticed rider, who, with his rifle, fell heavily to the ground.

"Ha! ha! ha! ha!"

A fiendish, discordant laugh shrilly arose from the undergrowth in front, and ringing with maniacal intonation for a few seconds, died away in a hollow echo round the hill. Duncan sat upright and listened, staringly, until the echo was lost, then rose, and darting to his rifle, grasped and cocked it.

"What the devil was that?" he muttered.

"By my uncle, what a horrible noise."

All was still. The mustang, with pricked-up ears, stood braced back, and with tossing head was snorting in alarm, and intently staring at the spot whence the wild laugh proceeded. Doubtless he had seen the utterer, who was even more horrible than his noise.

The cook proceeded to the mustang's side, and looking in the same direction, endeavored to pierce with his vision the barrier-like chaparral; but they were too thick and dark—he saw nothing.

He looked over his shoulder uneasily. He was alone in the glade. All around him was dark chaparral, gloom, and intense stillness; and the last slanting rays of the setting sun bathed his head in weird and ghastly splendor.

The mustang stamped impatiently; he liked not this ghostly glade. The cook called aloud:

"Hollo!"

No answer.

"Hollo—o! Is there any one in the shapperell that dar'sn't show his face?"

A hare did. First he peeped from the bushes timidly, then, not noticing Duncan, hopped quietly out into the glade. He came from the spot of alarm.

Suddenly, seeing the man and horse, the shy animal turned and leaped back into the bushes, and disappeared with a slight rustle. Duncan stared.

"By gosh!" he ejaculated, "'cording to the rabbit, I'm the only one around. For if there was a chap in the bushes he'd have come out on the keen jump, for that's the way he did when he see me. By ginger! I don't understand it; the rabbit's shy and skeery and has got sharper eyes than me; if there'd been any fellow there he wouldn't ha' come out so slow. Gosh! there's no one there."

As if to further convince him, an owl hopped from a low bush where he had been concealed, to a small tree close by, where he plumed himself, after a fretful croak. Could he have been mistaken in the noise—in his excitement had he imagined the notes of the screech-owl to be the laugh of a human being?

Such would seem to be the case, for if the chaparral had contained a hidden occupant, the suspicious owl would have discovered him and taken flight; and yielding to this latter conviction, Duncan blamed himself for being a coward and remounted the mustang.

Hark! a dull report came to his ears—the discharge of firearms a mile or more away in the direction of the tree of rendezvous. He listened for an answering report.

There was none, though he waited five minutes or more. He struck spurs to his mustang, and seeing a slight opening at a little distance, galloped toward it.

"Pedro shoots," he muttered, "and I ain't there to help him if he's in trouble. Oh, what a blasted fool and coward I was to stay there so long!"

Plying the spur, he dashed away through a natural lane in the chaparral, growing weird and uncanny in the fading twilight.

He was nearly to the appointed place of meeting, and had emerged into a plain covered with straggling bushes, when he saw a horseman a half-mile away, coming rapidly toward him, and dodging the scattering bushes. He reined in instantly.

A moment's glance sufficed him in which to recognize the approaching horseman. There was no mistaking the colossal rider, nor the black steed which so gallantly swept along with him. It was Pedro Felipe, riding like the wind to meet him.

"Hollo!" thought Duncan; "something's wrong." And he galloped to meet him.

A few seconds and the Spaniard reined in be-

side him with a force that brought the black horse back on his haunches. He was wildly excited, and his raven eyes glowed like coals.

"*El caballero, companero—el caballero!*" he cried, pointing back over his shoulder.

"*Ill cabbillaro—nar-ro-ill cabbillaro!*" snarled Duncan, as choleric as ever. "Darn it! you know I don't understand your cussed talk. Speak English, man—what's the matter? Spit it out!"

"The horseman, comrade—he is yonder. There are a dozen more just like him.

"What! Wh—"

"Back!" cried Pedro, wildly. "Back to camp! Fly—get the others at once!" and he squirmed in his saddle like an eel.

"But—"

"*Vamose!*" and the gigantic form of the Spaniard towered above Duncan, as, with flashing eyes, glowing face and huge arm stretched forth toward the camp, his voice rung out again:

"*Vamose!*"

"Bommos!" muttered Duncan, watching the Spaniard uneasily. "I know that—that says, 'Go—leave!' When he talks Spanish, he's mad."

Wheeling the roan mustang, he darted away like the wind, bound for camp, while Pedro sat watching him.

"Bommos!" muttered Duncan, again and again. "That says, 'Leave!' Gosh! how mad he is—never saw him so before. When he talks Spanish, something's up."

As the full moon brilliantly streamed its white light out over the *mezclas*, Duncan was out upon the plains five miles from his destination, riding for dear life toward camp. The roan mustang was doing his best.

"Bommos!" he cried, in a sort of wild delight to the mustang; "bommos!"

CHAPTER V.

A BALKED THROW.

PEDRO watched Duncan until he was lost to view, then turned his horse's head toward the late rendezvous.

All around him the various noises in the chaparral announced that day had departed. The steady, monotonous drone of nocturnal insects resounded sleepily through the breeze-trembling foliage; an owl boldly hooted from an adjoining tree; a coyote, yelping shrilly, slunk snuffing along through the glade; and the Southern lion—the ferocious jaguar—crept his supple length along, at intervals harshly screaming. Various rustlings in adjacent thickets betrayed the flight of the shy rabbit, under the craving supervision of some gaunt wolf; but though Pedro noticed each and every scream and rustle, he had been bred in similar jungles, and heeded them not.

With his right hand on his revolver, he still kept his steady pace, riding toward the tree. The white moon in the eastern sky glowed and shone with a splendor and radiance that northern latitudes cannot conceive of, making here a silvery, sparkling aisle, here a rippling, shimmering sea of foliage, and there a grotesque and gigantic shadow, sentinel-like, watching over some fairy glade.

The stag, as he lightly trod the damp and springing turf, ever and anon pausing abruptly at some fantastic shadow, only to be reassured by a second glance, turned and fled as a moving object crossed his vision; the figure, boldly outlined in the brilliant moonlight, of a tall, slender rider on a chestnut horse.

But Pedro saw neither stag nor horseman—that time was yet to arrive; but swinging along at a swift amble, passed out of the dense chaparral into the gleaming plain.

Still shines the moon; yet waxes the night; ever the varying yet monotonous din in the jungle continues; and Pedro, warily watching, rode on toward the tree.

The latter stood solitary, in a plain covered with scattering sage-brush and grease-wood—now forming a diminutive but dense thicket—now only appearing at intervals, and cast by the moon into grotesque and fantastic shadows, gigantic in dimensions.

Rounding a small jungle, the Spaniard reined in and scanned the tree, now in uninterrupted view. It was deserted—under its branches no one was visible. He pondered for a moment, then strayed into a rambling soliloquy, idly tapping the stirrup-block with his toe. He spoke in a tone of disappointment, and in his native tongue:

"He no longer is beneath the tree, but has gone—where, it is beyond me to tell. This mystery is getting thicker; who were the horsemen, and who were trailing them an hour ago?"

He paused and reflected a moment, then continued, vagrantly rambling, in and out among the bushes, the black horse snatching a mouthful of shrubbery here and there.

"What will my comrades say when I tell them the chaparral is occupied by more horsemen—desperate-looking fellows, armed to the teeth; that I counted a dozen sneaking after the strange *cavallero*—the Phantom Rider? Can it be that I have rivals in the chase? rivals whom it may be policy to avoid? Perhaps; I will conceal myself at least; it is foolish of me to ride broadly in this open plain in such brilliant moonlight."

He was turning his horse's head to ride into a neighboring chaparral a few yards distant. The act was not performed; for, as he was nearing the shelter, the bushes swayed, rustled, parted; and a horse and rider came slowly out, riding toward him.

It was the tall man with the hanging head, riding the listless chestnut steed.

The horse of the Spaniard, though bold and courageous, was suddenly seized with unaccountable fright, besides the start he gave at the sudden appearance of the horseman; and wheeling suddenly, turned tail and darted away.

He did not run far with his rider, for the latter braced himself in his stirrups and pulled hard on the bridle-rein. Under the strong check, the horse soon yielded, and his rider, gathering him up, shook him down once or twice, and soon collected his senses.

There are probably only three races in the world which fully understand the horse and the manner of managing him: the Arabs, Moors, and Spaniards. This Spaniard was a rider among riders, excelling in the skill and grace of his equitation, as in the knowledge of the disposition of horses; and quieted by his magnetic influence, the horse soon recovered his courage. It was the first time he had ever run away.

Though surprised at the extraordinary alarm of his horse, Pedro stopped not to inquire into it; but turned round and again faced the Phantom Horseman.

The latter was motionless, where he had emerged. Still his head hung down, his body was erect, and the lean, skinny hand clasped the loose bridle-rein; he was unchanged. As on the summit, the horse had drawn himself up, and was standing with drooping head, but steadily regarded the Spaniard's movements with pricked-up ears.

It is momentarily startling to meet at night, in a wild country, a man, unexpectedly; but when that man has been repeatedly shot at, always struck, and betrays no sign of injury, the feeling grows into one of alarm and positive superstition.

For the moment, such feelings Pedro felt, as he paused at the silent rider, who, with shrouded face, seemed to be steadily regarding him. He was face to face with the object he was seeking: the Phantom Horseman.

His alarm, however, was momentary, and quickly dissipated. Drawing his bridle-rein a trifle more taut, he gently pressed the black horse with his steel spur. The high-spirited animal, as if ashamed of his late timidity, instantly obeyed the signal, and in his habitual rapid walk approached the motionless form in front, while his master loosened his lasso from its loggerhead.

But now the demeanor of the chestnut horse underwent a change. As if animated by a sudden impulse, he started into an erect position and stamped impatiently. Tossing his head, with rapidly moving ears, he keenly watched the coming Spaniard, who being now within fifty yards, prepared to throw his lasso.

What was the matter with the chestnut horse, generally so listless and heavy? Was he Spanish bred? Was the experience of former captures warning him to beware of that slender coil in the Spaniard's hands?

An American steed would have noticed nothing wrong in the loosening of that coiled line depending from the saddle-horn: but a Spanish horse would have instantly fled, knowing to remain was to be captured.

The horse, however, kept his position, but "whighered" uneasily. Pedro still advanced, talking to himself:

"That horse is flesh and blood, whatever may be the rider. He is uneasy—perhaps he has been lashed before. But no—it can't be; he is pure American—there is no Spanish stock in him."

His muttering suddenly ceased as a stiff breeze swept through the chaparral, lifting the flap of the glazed *sombrero* on the bowed head in front. Pedro drew rein, sharply. In the in-

stant in which the brim of the *sombrero* was pressed against the crown by the breeze, Pedro had a full view of the features.

Now they were changed, he knew from Duncan's graphic description. The dark, skinny lips were now parted in a derisive, horrible smile, disclosing a set of teeth as white and fanglike as those of a wolf, and which glittered brightly in the gleaming moonlight. Instead of vacant, glassy eyes, Pedro was now quailing beneath the stern stare of a pair of orbs that flashed and scintillated like those of an enraged serpent, and were bent fully upon him.

The features, malevolent before, now wore a fiendish scowl; a dark, devilish frown that gave the entire face the expression of a thwarted arch-demon. The wrinkled brow; the sunken cheeks; the horribly-curling lips, all gleamed in the moonlight with a heightened ferocity, and Pedro shuddered as he gazed upon the face.

He stared as if fascinated—it was the first view he had had of the face. Across his swarthy cheeks he felt the blood come and go, while the hereditary legends and traditions of centuries thronged in his brains. Old nurses' stories of demons and goblins; hideous narratives of midnight assassinations in lonely unfrequented places; recollections of comrades' experiences—all these were but trifles to the sense of facing to-night, alone, in this wild jungle, the shadow of a specter.

Hal he started back in his saddle. Was not that a movement of the lean hand on the saddle-horn—did not the hideous, horrid head move just then?

No; it was only the night wind playing through the straight black hair—the tightening of the bridle-rein as the chestnut steed turned to depart.

As the quiet form passed by Pedro on the now slowly-trotting chestnut horse, the brim of the glazed *sombrero* again lifted, disclosing the face. Now the moon shone broadly upon it, revealing every lineament and deep seam; and Pedro, for the instant, covered his face with his hand to shut out the sight.

"Mother of God, what a horrible face!" he whispered, under his breath, "What a terrible scowl!"

When he looked up, the horse and rider were gliding through the bushes, retreating slowly. Somewhat relieved by the innocuous departure, the Spaniard watched them uneasily. As if entirely regardless of his presence, neither horse nor rider turned his head; but receding toward the hill, they were passing away.

He remembered his vow to Duncan, and his raven eye gleamed.

"Coward that I am!" he cried, recklessly, in a loud voice. "Now," and he waved his hand menacingly toward the retreating figure, "be you man, ghost, or devil, I'll have you if arm is able to cast the riata. Ho!" he shouted, in stentorian tones, and spurring his horse, "come my horse! show your breeding—ho! for the riata!"

The noble animal dashed forward in a sweeping gallop, and in a few vigorous leaps was within casting distance. The chestnut horse turned his head, then broke into a gallop.

"You shall not escape this time!" muttered Pedro, working himself into a passion. Then he seized his riata in his right hand, and whirled it over his head.

At this motion, well understood by the horse, the latter darted suddenly toward the intended capture, watching the whirling line over his head. When the coil left his master's hand he would halt suddenly, and wheeling, brace himself for the shock. Such is the breeding of the Spanish horse.

But this time he did not execute the maneuver; for, as the riata was on the eve of departure in its spiral length, a sharp report rung out from an adjoining thicket, and a bullet whistled by Pedro's head.

At the sound, so utterly unexpected, the black horse halted short in alarm, although accustomed to firearms. Pedro glanced sharply about him, still holding his unthrown lasso.

A white smoke arose from a thicket just in front. Pedro, staring sharply at it, suddenly observed the Phantom Horseman had entirely disappeared. He was not in sight.

The Spaniard did not care to expose himself to another shot, and hastily wheeled. With an oath of disappointment and amazement he dropped the coiled riata over the saddle-horn, and struck spurs to his horse.

"*Caraja!*"

Dashing out from the hill, dodging the bushes, riding like the wind, went Pedro, bound for camp.

"*Caramba!*"

CHAPTER VI.

CIMARRON JACK FINDS HIS DESTINY.

CIMARRON JACK and Simpson had not been absent over two hours, and were scouting along a narrow canyon, when the latter, who was in advance, suddenly reined in and began a hurried search throughout his pockets. Whatever he had lost did not come to light, for his brow clouded and he looked blankly at Jack.

"What's the matter?" inquired the young giant. "Lost your tobacco?"

"No—curse the crooked luck! I left pipe, fine-chopped, and plug at camp so I kain't smoke nor chaw. Give us a chaw."

Cimarron Jack reined in, and, placing both hands on the guide's shoulders, said:

"My Christian friend, can you for a moment imagine that this virgin mouth of mine could possibly endure the profaning contact with the vile nicotian weed? Are you so depraved you suppose every man to be as filthy as yourself? Ah, my friend! what do you suppose the Queen of the Fee-jee Islands would do if she thought the grizzly-domesticator chewed filthy tobacco? Why, she would never smile again."

This manner of talking always nettled the guide, and none knew it better than Cimarron Jack. Simpson burst out angrily:

"You talk an' act jist like a born fool, an' durned ef I don't more'n hafe b'lieve you air one. Now give us a chaw; I'm 'most dead fur some."

"Now give us a chaw!" mimicked Jack. "For all the world like a whining cur or a bla-a-ating sheep. Hear the slave of tobacco whine, 'give us a chaw.' Don't insult me by insinuating that I carry the vile weed."

"Kerry it! of coorse, yer don't kerry it!" said the guide, angrily. "I mout a knowed it 'thout axin'. No; yer don't never kerry it, but yer chaw more'n any other man in the hull outfit. No; yer kin beg terbacker, though, like a mice, but 'yer never kerry it; an' beg yer do, more'n twenty times a day."

Jack leaned back in his saddle and gave vent to a loud guffaw which echoed up and down the canyon. The guide grew angrier.

"Yer kin git yer own terbacker after this!" he declared, with a red face. "I detest and despise a man that chaws the hull time, an' never kerries any. Ef thar's anything in the world I despise it is a terbacker dead-beat."

Jack saw that he had gone far enough, and discreetly let the storm blow over, as he knew it would, as he and the guide were fast friends. The storm continued, and concluded with a spiteful gust of wind.

"I war goin' ter ax yer fur a smoke, but now yer may jest go ter gras; with yer borrered pipe an' yer begged terbacker. 'Tain't yer pipe, no-horn—I bought it at Santy Fee—an' I know durned well yer begged the tobacker of Duncan, wheedlin' him out'n a hull pound by tellin' him he was the finest cook yer ever see'd, when the cross lummux kain't cook at all, an' yer know it. Now I'm goin' back ter camp fur some terbacker; an' when yer come a-beggin' round me ag'in yer'll git refused—jest clap that inter yer borrered pipe and smoke it."

With this threat he abruptly wheeled and started back toward the camp, distant two leagues or more. Jack watched him for a few moments, and then followed closely.

"This wild-goose chase is too dull for the lion-tamer," he declared. "A man that eats fire and buckshot, picks his teeth with bowie-knives, and takes gunpowder broth for an appetizer, can't be expected to enjoy it; so here goes the god of war for camp."

With this modest enumeration of his warlike proclivities, he put spurs to his blood bay, and rode rapidly after the receding guide.

When the comrades entered the camp, the guide had entirely recovered his good-nature, and dismounting went into the tent, while Jack remained mounted.

For a moment only was the guide inside. Jack heard a long-drawn, low whistle, then Simpson came softly out on tiptoe, with his palm up-raised to caution silence. Walking away from the tent a short distance, he faced about, and placing his arms akimbo, stared back at it. Then he gave vent to a long whistle.

"Whew—w—w!"

"What's the matter?" asked Jack. "Indians come and stolen your nasty weed?"

"Who'd 'a' thout it?" was the only response; "whew—w—w!"

"Don't trifle with the cock of the walk—be-ware of arousing the ire of the modern Hercules! What's the matter?"

"Jack, such an out an'-outer yer never did see. Yer couldn't guess what's in that tent in a hull year."

Jack had never before seen the phlegmatic guide laboring under such amazement; something decidedly unusual had occurred.

Jack was not kept in suspense.

The guide stepped softly up to his pard, and whispered:

"Thar's a woman in thar, asleep."

"The devil you say!"

"No, I didn't say the devil—I sed a woman."

Jack looked incredulous. "What kind of a woman?"

"White, Americano, and sound asleep."

Jack burst into a guffaw.

"A woman, five hundred miles from any civilization! That's rich! 'Im, you are going crazy."

"If yer don't believe it, jest go an' see."

The young giant was not put to the trouble. As he was about to dismount for the purpose, a slight rustle occurred within, the canvas was shaken slightly, and a golden head peeped forth, lighted by the brightest, most timid, and softest blue eyes Jack had ever seen. Jack was an astonished man, but was more astounded when a shapely form followed the head, and a young girl stood before him with clasped hands.

"Please, sirs," she said, in a pleading voice, addressing the comrades, "please have pity on me."

"Heavens!" thought Jack, "what a lovely girl!" So unexpected was the entire affair that he could only ejaculate:

"Eh!"

The sweet face raised pleadingly toward his, though pale and careworn, was the loveliest he had ever gazed upon, and was that, apparently, of a young girl of eighteen years. Her dress was neat and plain, though rent in many places, evidently by briars. Her head was uncovered and her hair disarranged, and her whole exterior indicated she had recently fled from some disagreeable locality. Her voice was soft and gentle, and had a refined tone, which indeed pervaded her every action. Jack, recovering his equanimity, quickly observed she was a better woman than those he was accustomed to associate with at the forts. He must temper his behavior now, for a lady stood before him.

He took his foot from the stirrup, his hand from the saddle-horn, threw the bridle-rein over his arm and lifted his hat minus the usual swag-gar.

"Yours to command, miss," he said, with a graceful bow. "Can I assist you, Miss—Miss—"

"Kate—Katy Sandorn is my name," she interrupted.

The guide stared. What had come over his comrade? Though his speech was as usual, there was now an indescribable something that glowed like a halo about his simple actions of bowing and lifting his hat. Whatever he had been, the guide now knew he was a man, who could at will call forth the most princely courtesy.

The young girl, too, remarked the suave manner, and with the ready instinct of her sex, immediately leaned upon him as her protector. Her face lost its expression of extreme care and grief, and became in some degree composed as she replied to his question.

"Oh, thank you, sir, you can, indeed, assist me. I am in so much trouble, and I'm all alone here. Please keep them from me, and don't let them again take me."

Jack's fist rung down on his saddle-born.

"Let them try!" he growled, and his eyes sparkled. "Let them come on if they want to!" he declared, neither knowing nor caring who "they" might be. "I'm the cock of the—no, I mean I'm the grizzly—ahem! I'm very muscular, you see, lady, and I'm large, good for a dozen ordinary men," he concluded in confusion, smoothing his brawny arm.

The young lady gazed in mild surprise at the enigmatical portion of his speech, then smiled faintly, half amused as he concluded. She admiringly noticed his enormous proportions, and the accompanying bone and sinew; timidly marked his flashing eye, the haughty nose and sensitive mouth; remarked his proud head as he threw it back with an elk-like toss of defiance; and felt quite kindly toward this powerful, new-found champion. She could not repress this feeling, for all women worship strength and power.

In a few well-chosen sentences he managed with admirable tact to place her at her ease, so far as that state could be brought about under the embarrassing circumstances; and in return received a relation of her situation which was given in a low, sweet tone.

For the first time, and speechless with surprise, he learned that the vast territory of California had passed into the hands of the United States Government after a struggle; that in-

credible amounts of gold had been discovered on the American Fork and adown the Sierras; that a wild tide of immigration was pouring into that new-found Eldorado, delirious with sky-high dreams of becoming suddenly and enormously rich; that she and her father, in conjunction with a score more, had been pushing their way across by the southern route, when they were attacked by hostile Indians, and all, save herself and a small lad, had been massacred or carried into captivity, her father among the former.

She related, while he and the guide soberly and sympathetically listened, her adventures since the tragedy, now two weeks gone by. She and the lad had escaped with a few provisions, which she had secured with commendable presence of mind and forethought, and after lying perdu twenty-four hours in a chaparral, started for civilization.

Being ignorant of the route they had been pursuing, and striking the Colorado River, had followed its northern course, hoping by this means to strike California. But in a few days her provisions had entirely given out; by some means she had become separated from her little companion; and after two weeks of suffering unprecedented even in her own lively imagination, she fell in with a party of wandering hunters of the most depraved stamp, who immediately seized her and carried her into captivity.

The captain of this villainous band had confined her in a cave. But, aided by a merciful Providence, she had, only that morning, effected her escape, and after aimlessly wandering for the space of several hours, had fallen upon this camp, which she entered, and exhausted by her recent privations, had fallen asleep. They knew the rest.

Jack sprung to his feet.

"What!" he demanded, "were the villains, then, so near as that?" and he excitedly begged her to describe the exact spot.

She said it was a lofty hill surmounted by a bare and yellow summit, and surrounded with a dense chaparral, and thought it was about two leagues to the south of them. She presumed it could be seen from the camp, and arising was about to scan the horizon when they discovered night had fallen during the recital, and now a bright moonlight was streaming over the mezas.

Finding it could not be seen, probably owing to a mist which had arisen, the comrades bethought themselves of the needs of their new charge. She was faint from hunger and exhausted by suffering, and shaking up a bed in the tent, Jack bade her rest while they cooked supper.

This last refreshment she stood greatly in need of, and Jack, commiserating her sorrowful condition, bustled actively about, ever and anon casting a furtive glance at the fair girl within the tent.

"Kate Sandorn—Katy," he muttered, as the juicy steak of antelope sputtered over the coals. "Katy's a right pretty name, but the bearer is much prettier. She's an angel!" he declared, firmly, then his lip settled. "The villains! to shut such a creature up in a cave. We'll fix 'em to-morrow, that we will. I'm in for hanging, and that's too good for 'em."

He stopped for a moment in abstraction, then continued unconsciously aloud:

"Cimarron Jack, cock of the walk and king of the prairies—there is no use in talking, your heart is yours no longer."

The guide, boiling coffee, distinctly heard this last remark.

"What did ye say about yer heart, Jack?"

His comrade reddened.

"I was merely observing I hadn't the heart to turn away this poor girl. She is friendless—it is our duty to protect her."

"And we'll do it!" cheerily chimed the guide.

"But," (dropping his voice and shaking his finger at his comrade's back,) "my Christian friend, you are dead gone in love a'reddy."

"Dead gone!" he chuckled, in high glee over what he deemed his comrade's foolishness, as he bustled about, spreading the supper, "dead gone, Cimarron, dead gone!"

CHAPTER VII.

A CALL FOR AID.

AN hour later, and when the moonlight was at its highest degree of radiance, the three occupants of the camp finished their supper. The two men drew back from the spread, and filling their pipes, began to smoke vigorously, now and then casting a long look over the southern plain in expectation of their comrades, for whose return it was high time. Miss Sandorn, feeling every confidence in the integrity of her com-

panions, and reposing the highest trust in them, soon expressed a desire for sleep, and accordingly withdrew into the tent to secure the coveted repose, of which she had lately been in such need.

For a few moments Jack and the guide smoked in silence, each occupied with his own thoughts, when suddenly the latter spoke:

"Jack, don't you believe this chap that the cook sed he see'd has suthin' ter do with the gang that captured the lady?"

"I was just thinking of that myself," was the rejoinder; "but unless I mistake, we will soon learn, for there is some one coming."

As he spoke he lazily pointed over the southern plain. Scarcely discernible through the mellow haze and thin moonlight was a dark spot, rapidly rising and falling—a galloping animal.

"Whoever he is, he's in a hurry," remarked Jack, slowly reaching for his rifle, while Simpson laid his within easy reach.

"It can't be Pedro and Duncan, for they would be together, and there would be two spots instead of one."

"Wal, whoever he is, he's only one ter two, so thar's no use frettin'," and the guide laid his head back on his saddle-pillow, smoking quietly, but closely watching the rapidly approaching object.

It drew nearer—a quarter of a mile distant. Simpson raised his head on his elbow, peered at it for a moment, then quietly said:

"It's Duncan on the roan mustang—I kin tell the little villain as fur as I kin see him him."

The sharp eyes of the guide were right—Duncan it proved to be. He did not slacken his swift, steady gait, but swept down the hillside where he had met the Phantom Rider, and darting into camp, reined in violently.

His first greeting was a wicked one by Jack, who well knew the most vulnerable of the cook's weakest points.

"Come back to get supper, have you?" he asked sarcastically. "It's a pity you cut short your holiday ride for such an unimportant thing. Men that work hard dote on waiting three or four hours for supper. In fact, they don't want any—oh, no, indeed."

But, for once, the violent retort did not come, Duncan having almost ridden over the remains of the supper, which were directly under his nose; but his eyes snapped angrily, as he noted the malicious intent of the speech, and it was contrary to his hedgehog nature to forbear reply.

"Trying to pick a muss ag'in, are ye? Trying to torment and annoy your cook? You are old enough to know better, and to behave more like a gentleman, seems to me. Well, we'll do no wrangling now—I'm in too big a hurry."

"What's up?" demanded Simpson.

"Plenty. Saddle up as quick as you can, for Pedro is in trouble."

"What?" and the two men sprung to their feet. "What's the matter?"

"I don't know. He came all afire to me, and told me to fetch you all. I asked him what was the matter, but he was in such a fever he couldn't stop to tell, but sent me back to tell you to hurry. Gosh! how he did roll out the Spanish!"

"Eh? What did he say?" earnestly inquired the guide.

"Bammos—bammos!" and how his eyes did spit fire."

"Gents," and the guide brought his fist down on his open palm, "I've starved and feasted, laughed and cried, with Pedro Felipe, for these fifteen years, and I know something's wrong when he talks Spanish."

With this emphatic remark the guide brought the vicious mustang from his picket and threw the saddle upon his back in preparation for a speedy start. But Jack quietly continued his smoking.

"Ain't yer comin'?" asked Simpson.

"No," was the terse reply.

"Why?" and both Simpson's and Duncan's face expressed surprise.

"We can't leave the young lady alone here to have those fellows come and take her away."

"Let her come along, then."

"She's got no horse to ride."

"She kin ride the Spanish mare."

"Where is the side-saddle?" demanded Jack.

Duncan stared; "the young lady" was an enigma to him.

"Got a woman here?" he inquired.

Jack briefly related the arrival of his charge, and her adventures, and concluded with a glowing eulogium on her virtues.

"He's bound to stay hyar," whispered the guide to Duncan. "He won't leave her, for he's dead gone."

Duncan was too thunderstruck to feel surprised at this latter news; but soon recovering his wits, called out, impatiently:

"Well, if you ain't coming, just sing out, and me and Tim will go to Pedro."

In answer, Jack pointed to the hills. Outlined against the radiant, moonlit sky, were the forms of a dozen halted horsemen, looking down on the camp.

CHAPTER VIII.

AN UNGRANTED DEMAND.

"Do you see them?" demanded Jack. "Well, if you do, I'll tell you who they are, and what they want."

"Well?" questioned Duncan.

"They are the rascals that captured Miss Kate, and they want her."

"It won't do no good ef they do," added the guide. "They sha'n't hev her."

"Of course not."

A slight commotion took place among the horsemen on the hill; then a hoarse voice rung out in a rough hail:

"Camp, hallo!"

"Hallo!" responded Jack.

"What camp is that?"

"Explorers."

"Seen anything of a spotted mustang with a broken *riata* round his neck?"

"No."

"That spotted mustang is all in yer eye," gruffly spoke the guide to his comrade.

"They're after the lady."

"Hist!" continued Jack. Again came the hoarse hail:

"Who are you?"

"Cimarron Jack, Tim Simpson, and Kit Duncan."

Jack swelled somewhat as he noticed the names caused a stir among the band on the summit. With a ring of exultation, he called:

"Who are you?"

"Cyrus Johns's outfit—out on a raid after Comanche scalps."

"Yes, and plunder, too," added Jack, *sotto voce*. "Ah, he's a desperate villain—a regular cut-throat, and cunning as a wolf. One of Captain Hart's old gang, Tim."

"Ay, ay, I sabe."

"So you hain't seen nuthin' of the spotted mustang," called another and still harsher voice. "I don't like ter hurt yer feelin's, but I've got ter search yer. We dunno who yer be—it's mighty easy ter say you are somebody else."

"He feels bad about hurtin' our feelin's," muttered Tim. "That's Bill Moore, Jack. Gosh! ef they air all like him thar's a sweet gang of 'em. He wants to come an' see ef the lady's hyar—shall we let him, Jack?"

"No; tell him to keep his distance."

"Keep your distance, Bill Moore!" shouted the guide. "We don't want yer hyar, so keep off!"

"You are getting peart and peerky now-days, Tim Simpson," yelled the first speaker, Cyrus Johns. "Take care you don't get snapped up in it. You know the law—a man has a right to search anywhere for a missing horse, and if he's been stolen and the thief's caught, you savvy the rule—a California necktie."

"Don't insinuate that we *stole* your mustang!" growled Jack. "Recollect who you are talking to—Cimarron Jack, the king of the prairies, and the cock of the walk. I don't believe you have lost a mustang."

At this declaration a consultation took place among the band, briefly terminated. Apparently casting aside all disguise, the chief, Cyrus Johns, rode aside, and called out:

"Let the mustang go—it's no account. But you've got a girl there."

As if expecting an answer, he paused. None came. His voice grew a little hoarser:

"You've got a girl there that belongs to us, and we want her. We don't want to quarrel with you, and if you'll give her up we'll do the right thing by you. We have coin to spare."

Again he waited for an answer, again the pause was useless. His voice rung discordantly:

"It's no use in denying you've got her—we know you have. Once more, will you give her up and take a thousand American dollars as pay? She belongs to us, and we can by rights take her away from you; but, to avoid a quarrel, we're willing to give a bonus."

"By what right is she yours?" demanded Jack, incensed at the villain's effrontery.

"By the right of possession—nine points of the law."

"Is that your idea of law and justice?"

"You bet it is!"

"Then s e belongs to us, for she is now in our po-session. Your law goes back on you, Cyrus Johns."

"But I meant *first* possession."

"Then she don't belong to you at all, but to her father. She is an orphan, and has no guardian—she is free to go wherever she chooses, and she comes to us. You have no right to her."

The voice of the ranger grew angrier and authoritative.

"So you don't intend to give her up?"

"To such a villain as you are—never, *never*!"

The last words rung out decidedly as the young girl came out of the tent, and pale with fear gazed pleadingly into his eyes for protection. After this, whatever happened, he would fight, even die for her—so resolved the brave young giant, looking down into her frightened eyes.

"Do not be 'larmed, Miss Sandorn," he whispered, encouragingly. "We are famous for being the best shots on the plain—we will protect you."

His speech was amply rewarded by the eloquent, grateful look which flowed from her soft blue eyes. His heart beat faster, as taking her hand, he led her into the tent.

"Rest assured, lady," he murmured, "that whatever happens, John Worth—Cimarron Jack, will protect you. God bless you!" and bending low he raised her hand to his lips, and was gone.

"Again, will you give her up?" called the harsh voice of Cyrus Johns. "If you don't, we will open fire upon your camp."

"Open then, you woman-thieves!" vociferated the guide; and the reply was a flash, a report; and a bullet whistled over his head; hostilities had commenced.

"Tramp out that fire, Duncan—roll those bales of blankets into a shelter, Tim, while I bring in the mare!" and ere he had finished, Jack was rapidly running to perform his task.

Crack—crack! Several bullets whistled about him, but none took effect. It is not easy to strike a man running at full speed, at three hundred yards, by moonlight.

To uproot the picket and drag the old mare to the camp, was the work of very few minutes; and when he arrived, the fire was extinguished, the blankets, saddles and packs formed into a barrier, behind which lay his comrades snugly on their bellies.

A small gully, terminating in a short distance, lay behind them, of sufficient depth to afford shelter to the horses; and accordingly they hastened to picket them in that sheltered place, leaving them to browse on the dry but nutritious bunch grass which grows on the banks. This done, they returned to the breastwork; and having disposed of their weapons to the best advantage, awaited the further aggression of the enemy.

In the mean time, several of the besieger had dismounted and withdrawn their steeds to the opposite side of the hill, beyond the vision of the besieged, and returning to the summit, fell on their knees, and drawing their long knives, began to thrust them into the ground busily, as if digging.

"I don't know what they are doing, but it seems to be something to our disadvantage—it must be," remarked Jack, closely scanning their actions. "We had better put a damper on them if we can. How far does your rifle kill, Duncan?"

"At seven hundred yards."

"Good gun: mine won't but it does at five hundred. And yours, Tim?"

"Six hundred."

Aside from the main party were four men engaged in digging, while the remainder (eight) appeared to be in a consultation; and noting the former, Jack said:

"I'll take the left man, Duncan the next, and you, Tom, the next. Aim steady now—we had better rest on the blankets, as every shot tells. When the thoroughbred from Arabia counts three, draw trigger. One."

The guns were rested upon the blankets.

"Two."

Each man aimed steadily.

"Three."

At the simultaneous report, three of the four men sprung to their feet, and a wild yell floated over the plain; then two rangers sunk slowly to the ground, while the fourth and uninjured one staggered away with the third desperately wounded, on his back. A volley of oaths arose from the hill, and the rangers quickly scuttled from sight, leaving two horizontal objects on the summit—two dead men.

"Better than I expected," was the cheery cry

of Jack. "Simpson, give me a chew of tobacco."

The guide, entirely forgetting his angry vow of several hours since, quietly passed the "plug." Jack's eyes twinkled.

"And now, Duncan, give me a pipeful of tobacco—fine-chopped—while I smoke the pipe of war."

"Why, I gave you a bull pound not a week ago; what have you done with it?" demanded Duncan, aghast. "Besides, you can't both smoke and chew at once, can you?"

"You bet he can," declared the guide. "He uses more tobacco than any other man in the hull outfit."

"I wouldn't have thought of chewing or smoking, but when Duncan keeled over that little fellow on the hill, the smoke of his gun reminded me of pipe-smoke. It was a mighty, mighty shot. How do you load your gun, Kit, to make it shoot so unerringly? Why, man, it beats my shooting."

Startled at Jack's extraordinary elevation of another over himself, Duncan passed his sack of tobacco, of which the other abstracted a large handful, chuckling in his sleeve at his cleverness. Verily, "flattery sinketh into the heart of a fool," and it might truly be added, "and that of a camp cook."

As this side-acting was being concluded, a change made its appearance in the gang above, which had again clustered, though at a safer point. Hurriedly ranging themselves in a line, they leveled their guns toward the south, and at a gesture of command from their chief, fired.

Lowering their guns, they peered earnestly in the direction of the volley, as if ascertaining its effect; then a yell arose, and each man darted from view behind the hill.

Several minutes after, the friends saw them galloping away over the southern plain, plying the spur. They were evidently alarmed—what had caused their flight?

The cause soon manifested itself. A figure came into view on the summit—the form of a horseman riding along the crest of the hill, and obliquely from the camp. For only a few seconds the horseman remained in view, then his horse increased his pace to a gallop, and bearing his rider swiftly over the crest, disappeared, riding south.

Each and all (save the lady who was in the tent,) had no difficulty in recognizing the horseman; and though neither the guide nor the young giant had ever beheld him before, they instantly recognized him—it was the Phantom Rider.

He it was who had caused the hasty flight of the rangers.

CHAPTER IX.

THE POWER OF GOLD.

WHEN Pedro dashed out of the chaparral at the peremptory instigation of the unseen marksman, he did not long continue his flight, for he became ashamed of his timidity (?) when he had left the hill a half-league in the rear, and was out in the broad moonlight. Then he drew in, and wheeling, gazed back at the hill.

"Ah!" he cried, with a gesture of menace toward the hill; "you are a black place, fit for such a rambler to prowl about in. Dark and quiet—gloomy, as I fancy the stings of remorse might be. Well, I'll no more of you until daylight, then I'll lasso you, and ferret out the one that shot at me. Who could it be? Who could desire to take my life?"

"Indians? Scarcely; they would have been out and after me ere this. The strange cavaleros? Undoubtedly. Well, rest awhile—stay yet in your black chaparral. But, by the Order of the Cross, I'll see into this mystery, or never again tread the soil of Mexico. Rest awhile," he concluded, with an ominous wave at the island of hill and chaparral; "stay awhile."

He was about to resume his gallop for camp when a glistening at the horse's hoofs attracted his attention—a yellow, blazing glitter.

"What's that?" he inquired, sharply. "Gold? It looks like it—can it be possible?"

He wheeled about, hovering over it, but wherever he turned, the same glitter was visible, yellow and radiant. Whatever it was, it appeared about double the size of a silver dollar.

He rode away two rods and looked back—glitter. He receded three more and wheeled—still glitter. He rode at right angles and placed it between him and the eastern moon; would it, could it shine now, between him and the moon's rays? Yes, still glitter.

Round a fierce semicircle he spurred, gazing at it in fascination, trying it at all points and in all possible positions. Now hovering over it like a vulture; here wheeling at a distance like

a coyote, again galloping on it like the rush of a torrent; but everywhere he went it was still the same—glitter, glitter.

Again he stood silently over it, glaring almost savagely down upon its gleaming brilliancy, yet afraid to dismount, fearful of finding it some delusion; for this noble Spaniard (for noble he surely was), had a single glaring fault—the love of gold. He was a miser, that at some day he might become a spendthrift.

Still he pranced round it, unable to keep his enchanted gaze from it. His eyes ached with the unaccustomed strain—he did not mind it; his faithful steed was becoming impatient—he curbed him half angrily.

At last he drew away from it and whispered to his own ears: "I'll get down and pick it up—it is two twenty-dollar American pieces, perhaps; yes, I'll dismount."

He did, slowly slipping from his saddle, as if a noise, however slight, would spirit it away. He stood on the ground, and leaving his horse, crept toward it, ready to make a sudden swoop; and when he had drawn near, pounced upon it.

He picked it up and held it to the moon, and shouted in delight. It was no coin, no ornament, but a nugget of nearly pure gold as large as his saddle-born. He stared at it for several moments, then—toss! away it went up in the air, only to descend into his greedy palms, wide-stretched to receive it.

How it glittered in the air. He cannot resist the temptation to throw it up and see the blazing of its yellowness; and up it goes, again and again, while he stands with uplifted face, like an athlete tossing cannon-balls.

Still again, and for minutes, he repeated his wild gestures. Toss—up it goes; thud—down it comes. Then he laid it softly on the ground, and picked it up again for the pleasure of re-finding it; then leaving it, he ran away, and shading his eyes like a child, peered earnestly back at it—still glitter.

Recovering in some degree his composure, he weighted it in either hand, and endeavored to compute its value. It was nearly the pure metal, and weighed as nearly as he could determine, two pounds.

"Two pounds! how much is two pounds of gold worth—say?" he demanded of the black horse. "One hundred dollars or five hundred dollars—or five thousand dollars? Say—do you know?"

The horse watched him wistfully—he was thirsty and hungry, and wanted grass and water; but his master, usually more attentive to the wants of his horse than his own, now heeded him no more than if he had been the statue of a horse, save to question him mildly about his glittering gold.

"There's more where that came from, is there not? I believe it, I know it. But where did it come from? Say, do you know?"

He looked about him. Over the quiet plain where the yellow moonlight streamed, there was but one object to vary the level monotony, and that object was—the hill and its brooding chaparral.

"You are dark!" he cried, addressing the hill. "You are quiet—just the place for the yellow boys to hide in. A level plain never has gold, I've heard—it is only the hills that contain it. Where is a hill hereabout?—why yonder—the hill and the chaparral."

"Do you ride around nights guarding a hill full of gold?" he demanded, his thoughts reverting to the Phantom Rider, whom he addressed by atmospheric proxy. "I believe you do—I suppose you do. I have heard," he muttered, eyeing the horse, who returned his stare, "I have heard that gold has been hidden for centuries while men walked daily over it, without dreaming of its existence. Is it not likely, that here, where the foot of man has scarcely ever trodden, on yonder hill there may be gold—millions of it?"

It was possible.

He squatted beside his horse, and rapidly shifting the nugget from one hand to the other, commenced a rambling series of vague murmurings and theorizings, peering off vacantly over the plain.

"If there is gold in you," he declared at length, addressing the gloomy and forbidding hill, "it is coming out of your griping bowels. And who is to get it?" he continued, imagining himself to be the hill, derisively questioning Pedro Felipe. "Why, I'll get it! I'll dig! I'll burrow! and as for you who ride about of nights with your scowling face hidden—I'll lasso you to begin with."

He feasted his eyes a few seconds longer on his treasure, admiring with avaricious delight the gleam and glimmer of its rugged yellowness;

then sprung on his horse with the nugget clutched tightly in his hand.

"Here we go!" he cried, as he galloped away; "to lasso the prowler that guards the gold. I'll dig like a badger, and I'll burrow like a squirrel; and gold, if you are in that hill you are coming out. Here we go!"

Once more faced galloping toward the hill; once more to ride in the shadowy chaparral; once more to lasso the Rider that guards the gold.

Behind him lay the river, miles away, deep down in the ground, as it wound its querulous course toward the ocean. To the right, level plain and streaming moonlight; to the left, streaming moonlight and level plain; and in front, the hill, the chaparral, and the Rider that guarded the gold.

As he swept along, he kept his eyes on the plain before and to the left and right of him, looking for a mate to the sparkler in his right hand. But no gleam greeted his strained eyes, though he scanned every inch of the adjacent and contiguous plain; so absorbed in his search that he did not raise his eyes, but left the horse to follow his head. Suddenly the animal halted, and Pedro, startled, looked up. He was at the hill.

Before him, and bordered by dense thickets, was a small glade brilliantly illuminated by the moonlight; and in that glade, facing him, was the Phantom Rider.

CHAPTER X.

THE CAST OF THE RIATA.

ALBERT Pedro was actually searching for and wishing an encounter with the Phantom Rider, the meeting was so sudden and unexpected, on his part, that he reeled with surprise, too amazed to cast his lasso while he had the opportunity. It was an excellent chance for a cast, as the chestnut horse was wholly motionless, and not fifteen yards away. He had never before been in such proximity to him. It was a rare chance to throw his lasso, and had he immediately done so he might have met with success; but he was so surprised at the unexpected meeting he sat for a single half-minute staring hopelessly.

That moment over, his present opportunity vanished; for the chestnut horse, with a celerity for which Pedro had not given him credit, suddenly wheeled, and with a shrill neigh turned tail and darted away through the thickets at breakneck pace.

The Spanish *vaquero*, accustomed to surprises, quickly regains his lost presence of mind under ordinary circumstances; and this colossal *vaquero*, under this strange and extraordinary situation, soon recovered his, but too late, as the flying Rider was already some distance away, and hidden from view by intervening bushes.

But Pedro could yet see the glazed sombrero of the Rider bobbing up and down over the top of the "grease-wood" bushes, at every successive rise and fall, receding a rod or more; and, having regained his equanimity, he reproached himself for his inaction, and spurring his black horse, followed in hot pursuit.

But he did not go far. On rounding a small chaparral a few rods in advance, he came in full view of the flying Rider. The latter, still riding at a breakneck speed, was passing through a diminutive meadow or glade, where grew tall grass which reached to his horse's belly. On every side of this meadow, save where Pedro was, a dense chaparral bordered it, with a single exception.

Directly in the course of the Phantom Rider, and in fact evidently the place for which he was heading, a straight lane led from the meadow through the chaparral toward the hill. It was several yards in width and bore the appearance of having been constructed for a road, centuries ago. But now it was deserted, and the gleaming moonlight blazing down its length illumined its entire course—a furlong in length.

At the end of this radiant lane was a pool of water—a clear spring, issuing from the base of the hill. This he well knew, as he had watered his horse there several hours ago. A fissure, having its source at the pool, extended transversely across the lane at its extremity; a gully seven yards in width and four in depth. This made an impassable barrier at the lane's termination—a blockade. No horse could overleap it, and to spring down into its depth would endanger the breaking of several bones.

Pedro felt exultant as he saw the chestnut horse enter this lane and plunge toward the other end. The horse was flesh and blood—he was sure of that; and where was the horse that could leap the fissure?

The chaparral on either side of the lane was so dense a rabbit could scarcely creep through it, much less a large horse; so escape for the Phantom Rider was impossible, unless he wheeled and overrode the Spaniard, an action hardly probable. Hurrah! the chestnut horse had entered the neatest of traps, from which there was but one way of escape: to turn and run down Pedro.

"He cannot leap the gully—he cannot enter the thick chaparral!" shrieked Pedro. "He is mine at last."

Stimulated by the thought, he pressed his horse into a yet swifter gallop; and preparing for the capture, loosened his riata from the saddle-horn.

But he was forestalled. The chestnut horse was half-way down the lane, boldly visible in the bright moonlight. Pedro had just entered the lane, and with gaze bent upon his chase, was clutching his riata, when from the bushes opposite the Phantom Rider, a serpentine line shot out, swiftly unfolding; a lasso aimed at the neck of the horse.

Whirr!—the coil dropped upon the neck of the steed, but not to encircle it, though it was adroitly cast; for with a wild neigh the horse shook it off, and tossing his head careered onward still more madly—the attempt was fruitless.

Some one watching in the chaparral had endeavored to lasso the Phantom Horseman.

In a moment Pedro had reined in, and casting a hasty look ahead, wheeled to fly. He must not expose his neck to the aim of the unseen and unknown lasso, even if the coil had failed to capture the chestnut horse; it might encircle the neck of his steed.

In the glance that he cast down the lane he saw the Phantom Rider pause for a moment on the brink of the fissure. Then casting a wild look behind him, the chestnut horse, with a shrill "whigher," plunged downward into the gully with the Phantom Rider on his back.

Pedro gazed for a moment, utterly astounded at the feat. What manner of steed was the chestnut—was he, too, a phantom?

Once more balked; once more wheeling to retreat with an unthrown riata; again bound outward from the chaparral.

Another hasty look he threw back as his horse settled into the back-gallop. This time still, the lane had an occupant at its eastern extremity. But it was not the Phantom Rider—he had disappeared; but standing on the brink of the fissure regarding Pedro, was a man leaning on a long gun.

As he again transferred his gaze to the meadow, which he was about to re-enter, he saw an object which caused him to utter an oath and rein in as quickly as he could. The object was a man who emerged from the chaparral, and advancing to the center of the meadow, halted in Pedro's course and leveled a gun at his head.

"Halt, you greaser!" he shouted in a harsh, discordant voice. "Stand still, or I'll bore ye!"

His attitude was firm, and his tone was not a jesting one—he was wholly in earnest. Though too distant for his features to be distinguished, he was not more than five-and-seventy yards away—quite near enough to kill the Spaniard, if he shot. His entire mien was that of a desperado, and Pedro hastily unslung his rifle. But he paused in the act, as the man hailed again, and he fancied he could see the stranger's eyes gleam, so earnest was the tone.

"Halt—stop! don't unsling that gun. If you do, I'll bore ye."

The repetition of the great, and the significance of the word bore, had their effect on Pedro. For a moment he was undecided whether to put his horse into a gallop, and riding down the challenger, risk the latter's bullet; but aware that every man that roamed the plains was precise with the rifle, he saw it would undoubtedly result in his death, and abandoned the idea.

He looked back at the gully. Possibly if the man had vanished from the fissure, he could wheel and escape as did the Phantom Horseman, though it would be extremely perilous; but no—there he stood on the brink still, leaning on his gun, with his face toward him. Escape here, too, was impossible.

He was surrounded, and by men who were bent upon capturing him, and that alive. It was only too evident—their every action betrayed their determination to do so, and it alarmed him, for it showed they had a hidden design upon him.

Well, *caramba*, here he was, but he would endeavor to elude them yet, and he rapidly looked about him.

A live-oak, with squat, spreading branches, was close at his left hand—in fact, one of the lower and outer limbs, swaying in the breeze, ever and anon tapped him on the shoulder. Underneath the branches was dense, opaque shadow, and beyond, the chaparral was matted and hedge-like. He could not force his horse into this latter and escape, but he could, perhaps, dart suddenly into the shadow, and be protected in some measure from the enemies' bullets. Perhaps by temporizing he might yet escape.

He glanced at the desperado in the meadow. Tired of keeping his gun at arm's length, he had dropped it into the hollow of his arm, seeing the Spaniard made no demonstration. The man behind at the fissure had not stirred—he was yet regarding Pedro; and taking advantage of their momentary relaxation, he jerked the bridle-rein sharply to the left, over the black horse's neck.

The Spanish-bred horse, accustomed to dart at the slightest signal, was under the tree in two seconds' time; for the present Pedro was safe to some degree.

The man at the fissure, though seeing Pedro's disappearance, was too well acquainted with the density of the chaparral to fear his escaping; and now his enemy was hidden, he, too, moved into the thicket, to avoid any unseen bullet which the Spaniard might easily direct at him. His brother desperado in the meadow, also quickly scuttled into the chaparral before Pedro could bring his rifle to bear upon him; and over the thickets, adown the meadow and lane, not a creature was visible.

Pedro's first act was to secure his nugget to his saddle. He was resolved if they did capture him that they should not possess his gold.

"If to-night I am shot and killed, or taken prisoner," he calmly thought, "my brave horse will be at camp in thirty minutes' time. And then they will come to the rescue, if not already, as they should be, on their way hence."

Duncan had left him two hours ago, to bring the other two comrades—they should be here now. He grew uneasy at their non-arrival—had evil befallen Duncan?

He was not aware that at that very moment his companions were confined to the camp by quadruple their number of desperadoes, who were bent upon keeping them there; and that a plan to capture him alive had been determined upon by these very men, hours ago. But he waited, listening eagerly for any sounds indicative of his comrades' arrival, and watching every twig, thicket and shadow about him, with every sense on the alert.

An hour passed dimly by, and his uneasiness increased at the non-arrival of his comrades. What could detain them?

A slight rustle took place on the edge of the chaparral across the meadow at the spot where his challenger had disappeared. He leveled his rifle silently upon the spot, ready to fire should an enemy show himself. Another movement occurred, and he heard a distinct rustling of the bushes; then an arm was projected, the hand moving slowly over the ground as if feeling for something. It would not do to fire at the arm, although he had an excellent opportunity for shattering it; when he shot he meant to kill.

The rustle grew louder, the bushes shook violently; a man was there—undoubtedly the desperado who had barred his path.

As the moon rose higher in the zenith, a random ray found its way through the oak's branches, and slanting on his head and shoulders, illumined them brightly, though without his knowledge. Now any enemy that might be in his rear, could have a full view of his body from the waist upward.

An enemy was in the rear—a man stealing from the fissure toward him, keeping closely in the shadow, which now half-concealed the lane. He drew near, nearer; in one hand was a cocked revolver, in the other a lasso.

The rustle across the meadow increased to a violent shaking of the bushes, and a head was thrust forth, only to be drawn quickly back again. It was the head of his challenger. Now the man in the lane was within twenty yards of the live-oak, with his eyes fastened on the Spaniard's gleaming neck and shoulders.

Still again the bushes were shaken back and forth, and he watched them eagerly. It was a lure to attract his attention. Better had he cast an occasional glance to his rear.

Suddenly the head was again thrust forth, and the hand and arm were waved tauntingly at Pedro, who quickly aimed, only to be disappointed, as the head vanished. The man in the obscurity of the lane now waved his *riata* hurriedly over his head once, twice, thrice, and

then, with all his force, hurled the coil at the gleaming shoulders of the Spaniard.

The latter heard the "whirr," and withdrawing his gaze, looked quickly back. But he looked just in time to see a spiral line darting toward him from across the lane—just too late to avoid it, and ere he could move from its path the noose had settled over his shoulders—the gleaming moonbeams had betrayed him.

The man in the lane, as he saw the noose encircle his victim's neck, yelled in gratification, and throwing his entire weight and strength into the action, jerked the lasso. The noose slid, settled, and became taut, and Pedro, unable to help himself, was rudely jerked from his horse, which neighed in alarm and galloped madly away.

He was captured—taken alive.

Away went the black horse, bound for the camp, with the nugget of gold beating a rapid tattoo upon the saddle.

CHAPTER XI.

A JOVIAL BANDIT.

PEDRO'S rude fall partially stunned him, but he soon recovered, to find his two enemies standing over him. One was a short, sinister fellow, of great muscular power—his lassoer; the other was tall and sinewy, and of a fierce disposition—his challenger. At a glance he knew he had fallen into rough hands, and might expect correspondingly rough treatment. He noticed they were heavily armed, but, naturally incensed at their cool capture, he stoutly demanded, sitting upright:

"What do you mean, senors, by lass'ing me? I have done you no harm—you must be mistaken in your man. Let me arise."

With this demand he essayed to get up, with the lasso tightly confining his arms, but the short ranger rudely overturned him, with a curse.

"Keep quiet, greaser, and lay still, and yer'll git treated better than white-livered Mexicans deserve. But if yer go to cutting up yer didos, yer'll git handled without gloves, so you can put that in your pipe and smoke it."

"Senor, loose this *riata* and allow me to rise. I've got no money, if that is what you want."

"No, I savvy," remarked the tall desperado, sarcastically. "I never saw a greaser that did have more than a few dollars. But you've got a fine gun here—or rather I have," and he inspected Pedro's rifle.

"And a pretty 'cute kind of a knife," and with this remark, the lassoer coolly abstracted a jeweled dagger from his captive's belt.

"I'll raise you two, and call," and the taller one drew a brace of elegant revolvers from the same place.

Pedro sighed at seeing his beautiful and favorite weapons appropriated by the villains. The dagger was golden-hilted, the revolvers were silver-mounted, and the elegant rifle was worth a large sum.

"Recollect, this is robbery," he growled between his teeth. "I'll mark you two rascals hereafter—*car-r-amba!*"

By way of rejoinder, he received a lusty kick in the short ribs, and the threat that if he didn't keep his windmill shut off, he would get the wings knocked off, which a metaphorical and elegant speech, translated into plain English, meant that he would have his teeth knocked out, if he did not keep a closed mouth.

He was sufficiently acquainted with desperadoes to reflect that discretion is the better part of valor, and like a shrewd man, kept his peace externally, but within he was as a raging bull; and he swore lustily to himself, in a way Spaniards only can. They rifled his pockets, ravaged every portion of his outer clothing, and quarreled over their illegitimate booty, kicking him from time to time in barbarous delight; and at length the taller rascal went off to fetch their concealed horses, swearing at the flight and escape of the noble black horse, which he had in vain attempted to lasso.

The horses were brought, and Pedro was roughly jerked to his feet, and after being placed upon one of them was securely lashed to the saddle with the *riata*; and then his captor mounted behind him, and his companion vaulting into his saddle, they rode away, bound, Pedro knew not whither. His victors, after the first outbreak, had relapsed into moody silence. Leaving the chaparral, they entered the *mezas*, and galloped toward the camp.

An hour later, they rode into the midst of nearly a dozen men, who were temporarily encamped on the hill, where Duncan had met the Phantom Rider, a half-mile distant from the camp; and seeing their warlike attitude, Pedro

knew at once why his comrades had not come to the hill in accordance with his desire—they were besieged by a band of rangers, though for what reason, he could not imagine.

The mysterious shots aimed at his head, the strange horsemen, he had seen in the chaparral, were enigmas to him no longer; the marksmen belonged to the band, and the *cavalleros* were even now clustered about him.

"You have got him, I see, men," observed the chief, Cyrus Johns. "Well, you have worked it finely."

The band, save several who were evidently acting in the capacity of spies, gathered about Pedro as he was pulled from the saddle. He was securely bound, hand and foot, and placed upon his back, with a saddle for a pillow; and then the chief said:

"Mr. Greaser, I suppose you would like to know why you are brought here, wouldn't you? Well, to give you a little idea, I'll tell you. There's a woman in your camp, ain't there?"

"Not to my knowledge, señor."

"There's a lie at the start. You are beginning well, greaser."

He was a coarse-featured, wolf-eyed man, rather large than otherwise, and though he habitually spoke sarcastically, there was a gleam of devilish ferocity in every action. At his last remark, Pedro scowled at the sensual face, but said nothing, and his captor resumed:

"There's a woman there, and you know it. Well, I suppose you also know she belongs to me. If you don't you'd ought to, so it's all the same. Now, your high-toned and cranky pals don't intend to give her up to her lawful owners—at least they say they won't. But we are going to have her, and the way we'll do it is this: to-morrow morning we will take you out on the hill, and give them the choice of two things; to deliver up the girl, and take you back, and a thousand American dollars (we are willing to do the square thing) to boot. Otherwise, if they don't choose to do it, we will shoot you. That's all, Mr. Greaser."

"Stay!" cried Pedro, as Cyrus Johns was turning away. "I protest there is no woman in our camp—at least there was none when I went away in the middle of the afternoon. If the woman, whoever she is, is at our camp, she has entered since I have been absent."

"Taking all you say for the truth, greaser, that don't make a straw's difference. They've got her, and we've got you; you've been told how we are going to get her."

"But, señor, supposing they will not give her up and you do shoot me. That will not do you any good—it will not bring the woman back."

"There'll be one greaser less in the world, then," was the brutal rejoinder. "Curse a greaser! I hate the whole treacherous tribe."

Pedro fumed. "I am no greaser, you low scoundrel!" he thundered. "My grandfather was a Castilian noble; and had not my father been exiled on account of politics, I would have been a noble to-day."

"Exactly, Mr. Greaser—I savvy. My grandfather was hung for murder; and if my father wasn't in the penitentiary for life on account of a little fracas with knives, he would be out; see the point?"

With this jocose bit of family history he finally turned away to snatch some sleep against the morrow's crime; and Pedro, angrily muttering, was taken to the summit of the hill where he would be under the supervision of the guard; and having tightened his bonds, his escort left him in charge of the latter, and unrolling their blankets from their saddles, they lay down beside their horses and went to sleep.

Pedro was greatly surprised at hearing a woman was in the camp, but he had no reason for disbelieving the statement. His captivity, and the proximity of the rangers to the camp did but confirm it; and taxing his brain to invent means of escape, or at least, communication with his friends, he sat on the summit, looking down upon their silent camp.

The only means which he could devise for escaping were put into execution immediately. There were three watchers closely eyeing the camp—one close by, another at some distance, and the third still further removed. The nearest ranger divided his attention between his lookout and his prisoner; humming a minstrel-hall melody the while, snapping his fingers as an accompaniment. He seemed a jovial fellow, and Pedro broached the idea in his mind—a bribe.

Although he offered for his freedom all his ready money (three hundred American dollars) and his two pounds of gold, at the same time artfully hinting at future emolument in the shape of additional coin, the ranger heard him

quietly through to the end, then decidedly shook his head.

"It's no use, pard," he said, "no use—don't think of it, for you can't work that game with us. Why, man! our pockets are stuffed with gold—we are rich, every man of us; and a few hundred dollars more or less don't signify. If I was poor, now, 'twould be different; but I am rich, and that stops your deal at the very soda. If you ever played faro-bank you'll see the point."

Pedro had, and did.

His good-humored tone showed him to be a genial, hail-fellow-well-met sort of knave, but there was no mistaking him—he could not be bribed. No more could his comrades, he said—they were too rich—too rich.

He said the party had halted temporarily at the chaparral to recruit, before undertaking their arduous desert journey to Texas, where they were to disband, after having been on the maraud for two years. During that time they had become rich, every man of 'em, he said, chuckling—every man of 'em rich.

He gloated over this, repeating his favorite word, which was music to his ears, several times; and waxing sunnier and more genial at the thought of future high living and aimless vagabondizing, he offered Pedro his pipe to keep up his spirits, he said. As for him, he didn't need any stimulant, for he was rich.

Pedro gratefully puffed the pipe, though it was strong with age and villainous tobacco, but but passed a dismal night filled with gloomy forebodings, though his jovial guard cracked jokes, sung comic songs, and narrated droll incidents the entire night with infinite gusto. At intervals assuring a rake-helly air, he would strut up and down his beat, occasionally pausing to execute a jig or a shred of hornpipe; but his gayety jarred upon Pedro, and his spirits sunk lower and lower, as he pondered over the probable events of the morrow.

CHAPTER XII.

SURROUNDED.

AFTER the rangers had galloped away in affright at the appearance of the Phantom Rider, the friends arose and stretched their legs, and though hardly daring to venture far from the breastwork, the guide and Duncan busied themselves in collecting sufficient bunch-grass for the horses in the gully behind them. After a sufficiency had been deposited before them they returned, and leaning against the breastwork, occupied themselves with surmises as to Pedro's locality and well-being. They were not alarmed at his absence, having the highest confidence in his sagacity and caution; but still these might stand for naught against the horseman whom precisely-aimed rifle-bullets could not injure. Their tones grew lower as they entered upon this subject, while Jack within the tent was busily occupied in comforting Kate, who was highly alarmed at the determination of her former captors.

"Never fear, lady," he said; "while one of us breathes we will protect you."

"You don't know how you comfort me," was the grateful rejoinder. "My debt of gratitude is far greater than I can ever hope to repay."

"Man is bound," replied Jack, solemnly—"man is bound to protect others weaker than himself, which is exactly what we are doing and which we are by the laws of nature required to do."

She smiled as he thus cast condescension to the winds, and a grateful warmth glowed in her lovely eyes.

"But your other companion, the Spaniard—Pedro—is he not long absent—are you not alarmed at his prolonged stay?"

"No, lady—Miss Kate, if you will allow me to address you in that manner," and the cunning Jack gave her no time for consent or refusal, but went rapidly on: "he is wary and shrewd, in fact, being the second sharpest man that roams the plains."

She naturally asked who was the first and foremost. He bristled like a turkey-cock.

"Who? Why, me, of course; that's a pretty question to ask the lion-tamer. I'm the cock of the walk! I'm the Feejee dancing master and the king of—"

He stopped short in embarrassment as she colored and drew away from him in alarm. Red with shame, he hastened to apologize.

"Pardon me, please," he pleaded. "You think me insane, and no wonder. It is a bad habit I have fallen into, this vaunting. If you will excuse it this time, I will endeavor to reform."

It is said that man is constantly changing,

and it would seem so in this case. Here the braggart was casting off his robe of many-colored vaunts, doffing it to don one of humility, crawling out of his external self like an eagle deserting his last year's feathers: and had Simpson seen him then, he would have been amazed.

"I am not what you deem me," he added, anxious to reinstate himself in her good opinion. "I am not a professional hunter and plainsman; I am driven to lead the life."

"Driven to it?" she asked, in surprise.

"Yes, driven to it. I am by profession an artist—a landscape and scenic painter; and many's the connoisseur that has eulogized my works."

She smiled, though kindly, and her beautiful face expressed her amusement. He flushed.

"Do you think I am joking?" he demanded, "or again boasting? No; and to convince you, I will get a charred brand from the coals outside and sketch your portrait on the canvas; and poor as are my implements, if you don't think, when you see it, that you are looking into a mirror, my name is not John Worth, or Worthington."

"Come outside, Jack," called Simpson, from without.

"Don't be alarmed, Miss Sandorn," he again said. "As long as I can move a muscle, I am devoted to your service. I must go now," and with these words he was gone.

His two companions were standing together, looking off over the southern plain. The guide pointed to the western extremity of the hill, where a madly galloping horse was approaching riderless.

"That's Pedro's horse, coming back without him."

Jack saw at a glance the guide was correct. There was no mistaking that swift, smooth gallop of the noble black horse; and in a few seconds' time he dashed into their midst and halted, snorting in affright, with an empty saddle and swinging stirrups.

"Something's happened to Pedro!" cried the guide. "Something's happened to my old chum. Curse that ghost! I believe it has spirited him away."

It would be a difficult matter to find two men more devoted to each other than were Pedro Felipe and the guide, friends and comrades of years' standing. Alarmed, and not without abundant reason, he clapped his saddle on the vicious mustang, and was working like a bee in hasty preparation to search for his friend, when a cry from Jack and an oath from Duncan arrested him. He turned hastily, half-sick at thinking blood had been discovered on the Spaniard's saddle—the life-blood of his old friend.

He drew a breath of relief as he saw Jack narrowly scanning a yellow object in his hand, and which he had taken from the saddle. Another glance and he recognized it—Jack held a nugget of gold.

Had Pedro discovered treasure somewhere—had he sent his horse to camp with the nugget by way of message? No; the first self-query was absurd, and the second silly—something had happened to his old friend.

After the first questioning glances, he bestowed no more attention and thought upon the gold than if it had been a stone, although Jack, in admiration, was lauding it to the skies. What was a nugget—a paltry lump—a mine of gold, even, while his comrade might even now be dying far from help? Nothing, less than nothing, were that possible.

But another burst of profanity from Duncan, and a responsive ejaculation from Jack, caused him again to pause and follow their outstretched arms with his gaze. Seeing what they did, he swore roundly; the rangers having recovered from the fright occasioned by the Phantom Rider, were reassembling, and were even now on two sides of the camp.

He must be expeditious now, or his outward course would be obstructed—or, to use his own expressive remark, his game would be blocked. In a few seconds the mustang stood saddled and bridled. He hastily grasped his rifle, and looking to his revolvers, sprung into the saddle and started from the camp, riding toward the north, the only side now which was not occupied by mounted rangers.

But he did not go far. Seeing a horseman leave camp and spur swiftly northward, several rangers galloped to intercept him. Simpson urged his mustang to his fleetest now, but he was too late; before he had ridden two hundred yards, three horsemen were in his path, and a hoarse hail greeted him:

"Keep back—halt, or you drop!"

He obeyed the command, seeing the utter use-

lessness of endeavoring to pierce the line of horsemen which encircled the camp. He looked this way and that, with the wistful eagerness of a hunted fox; but, turn whichever way he would, he still saw a man in his path, with more at hand to spur to his assistance in case it should be required.

In his wrath, he cursed the bright moonlight for having exposed his actions, hurled a volley of maledictions at his enemies, and, in his rage, shot wildly, and wide of the mark, at his nearest foe. In reply, several bullets whistled uncomfortably near his head, with the accompanying remark, uttered in a threatening tone:

"Get back into your hole, Mr. Rat, or your friends will have to make one for you, somewhere in the vicinity of six by two."

Sullenly retreating, the wrathful guide obeyed the stern command, and retraced his steps into camp and dismounted, fuming. But he left his mustang ready equipped to make a sudden decamp, should an eligible opportunity occur. But to his further discomfiture and chagrin, it did not fall to his lot to leave, although he kept constantly peering in quest of an opportunity the entire night. His companions busied themselves when the moon set (which it did a little while before dawn), in transferring the entire camp to the gully behind them; and when the first gray streaks of daylight slanted across the sky, and gradually augmenting, lighted the plain, the bandits on the hill shouted in surprise! the camp was not in sight.

CHAPTER XIII.

A WELCOME REFRIEVE.

THE same gray streaks which heralded the approach of day, and originated the cry of surprise from the bandits, called forth a similar though cautious one from the friends lying *perdu* in the gully; for Simpson's keen eyes, scanning the summit, had fallen upon Pedro, a captive, sitting upright, calmly puffing a pipe, and closely guarded by a single man. The guide sighed in relief at seeing him alive and sufficiently well to smoke, and though not relishing his captivity, he regarded it as infinitely better than death.

He was so far lightened in spirit that, leaving Jack to guard the camp, he and Duncan started away down the ravine with a skillet and a quarter of antelope; for your ranger, even in the midst of deadly peril, will not forego his meal, if he can possibly find an opportunity in which to eat it.

The descent of the gully was so rapid, that a few rods down, it became a canyon, with precipitous walls, nearly a hundred feet in height; here was a capital chance to cook without being betrayed by the smoke. A few light, dry sticks were gathered from neighboring dwarf-oaks, and as these had been drying ever since the winter rains, they emitted but little smoke; and soon the antelope was sputtering on the coals.

It was not long before they reappeared at camp with the skillet full of juicy steaks. Miss Sandorn appeared, much refreshed, and though still fearful of being recaptured by her dreaded enemies, brightened the breakfast by her sweet, womanly presence, and the meal was discussed in moderate spirits, though dashed with melancholy at the thought of their comrade and leader being in the hands of the bandits.

They had scarcely finished, and were rallying Duncan upon having gotten through a meal without a surly remark, when a hoarse hail came from the hill in the voice of Cyrus Johns:

"Hallo, yender! I've got something to say."

"Spit it out!" whispered the guide, epigrammatically.

"You needn't think we don't know where you are," continued the gruff voice. "You are in that gully. Now, if you want to save your greaser's life, you had better answer."

The three friends cautiously peeped over the bank, and saw the robbers assembled on the hill, with Pedro, now erect. Three men sat on their horses a half of a mile north, making a surround.

"Do you see this fellow?" shouted Cyrus Johns, pointing to Pedro, who was aside from the rest.

"Yes," halloed Jack in reply. "He is the only decent man among you."

"You'll sing a different song before night, Cimarron Jack," was the angry reply. "You'll beg on your knees for your life—mind that."

"Ah, jest shut yer foul mouth!" shouted Simpson. "Cyrus Johns, you ain't fit to kerry slops to a bear."

The hoarse voice became angrier.

"You, too, mark my words, Tim Simpson."

I'll send you to your reckoning before sunset. You've seen the sun rise for the last time."

"Don't aggravate him, Tim," cautioned Jack. "If you do, he may harm Pedro."

The clustered bandits remained silent as their leader proceeded, shouting to make himself heard, being nearly three hundred yards distant.

"I've got a proposition to make to you fellows. I've got no ill-will against you—you never did me no harm beyond killing three of my men last night, and every one of them was a fool. If you'll do what I want you to (it ain't much), I'll give you a thousand American dollars, deliver up the greaser, and let you go free. But if you don't consent, I'll shoot the greaser right here where he stands, so you can see the fun, and then charge your camp, and leave every man of you lying dead in your gully."

"That is a pleasant prospect, indeed," growled Jack, who well knew what the "proposition" would be. "Don't be alarmed, Miss Kate," he whispered, consolingly, to the young girl, who was pale with fear.

"The proposition is this," resumed the bandit: "Give up the girl, and take your Greaser and your thousand dollars, and go wherever you please; but if you refuse, you'll see the Greaser dead in three minutes. Then, if you still refuse, we'll kill every mother's son of you. Now you can take your choice—you've got the two to choose between."

"I'll give you five minutes to decide in," he shouted, in conclusion; "and I intend then to stick to my resolution."

He turned away, and leaving Pedro strongly guarded by three men, he called the trio from the opposite side of the camp, well knowing the friends would not leave their present position under the circumstances; and when they had arrived, he collected them in readiness to carry out his plans.

Jack turned to his companions, supporting the young lady who was half-fainting with apprehension. "Well?" he inquired, "what is your opinion, comrades?"

He met with no reply. The cook sat with his hands clasping his face, sorrowfully, gazing at the ground, while the guide fingered his knife convulsively.

"You've got to make up your minds," continued Jack, sadly. "That villain means every word he says, and in five minutes will demand an answer. Think well over it, boys—it is a horrible alternative at best. And I hope," (and he elevated his hand and turned his face, white and stern, skyward) "I hope that if there is a God, and if there is such a thing as a hell, that every man that takes part in these foul deeds will be eternally damned."

He met with no response yet. The brains of the two men before him were surging with dark and bitter thoughts, commingled with wild sorrow.

"Can't we make a charge, and rescue Pedro?" inquired the guide, without raising his eyes.

"It's no use—the moment we leave this ravine to do it, they will stab Pedro; no, Tim, we can't rescue him, except by—"

He halted short, he could not think of the alternative; but, winding his arm round the waist of the weeping girl, put his hand to his face and shut it from sight. His comrades could see the huge form of their companion on the summit erect and defiant, yet with his face silently regarding them, as if in mute appeal. Every past kindness, joy, and pleasant time came vividly to remembrance—every generous deed his noble heart had prompted, recurred with tenfold intensity; and, could they now see him shot dead before their very eyes? No! ten times, a hundred, a thousand times, no!

But, could they yield this creature sent by Providence to their protection to the depraved and brutal men above?—could they, if they did, ever sleep without seeing her agonized face confronting them in stern accusation—hear her shrieks of agony in their midnight dreams? Thinking of mothers, sisters, daughters, at home, could they for a moment entertain the thought of giving her up! No! ten times, a hundred times, a thousand times—no!

The young giant endeavored to instill some comfort into the heart of the distressed girl, but met with no success, not being in a state of mind qualified to inspire hope. She fell on her knees, and with her beautiful face piteously working beseeched, and implored him to save her from those terrible men: sobbing wildly and wringing her hands, as if her heart would break, wringing his to the very core.

He was in a harrowing position, and he knew no means of extricating himself with an easy

conscience. He truly, and with his whole earnest soul, loved the creature who was driving him mad with her frantic appeals for protection, and several times was on the verge of saving her at all risks.

But when he turned toward the hill and saw his companion's sad face turned toward him silently, his whole nature arose in arms; no! he never could, he never would, see his comrade shot down like a dog before his very eyes.

A wild idea entered his brain. He would gather his tiny force and make a desperate charge upon the bandits, and endeavor to rescue Pedro. But the idea was rejected as soon as conceived—at the first demonstration a knife would be plunged into Pedro's heart.

The demeanor of the young girl changed. Her lovely face became set in a hard expression, which alarmed him, it was so stony. Her eyes glittered, hard and cold, and steadily gazing into his face, she said quietly:

"If I am not given up, will they kill your friend?"

He bowed sadly. She continued, in the same clear tone, steadily looking into his eyes:

"My coming here has caused all of this trouble, and I know how hard it is for you noble, brave men to give me up. I cannot live with those men—I cannot see your friend die; will you lend me your knife?"

He clasped her tightly to him.

"My knife!" he gasped. "What do you want with my knife?"

A sudden spasm shook her, and she wildly pressed her hands to her bosom; then recovering, she continued:

"I cannot, cannot live with those men, and your friend will die if I am not given up. I will end this trouble—lend me your knife!"

He drew away from her.

"No, I will not!"

Her eyes blazed.

"Lend me your knife!"

"I will not!"

She was quivering with excitement.

"I order you!" she cried, "I command you to lend me your knife!"

"Boys," he cried, "hold on to your knives—she is going crazy and wants to kill herself."

The two men were awe-stricken, as she stood with blazing eyes confronting him. At this juncture a hoarse hail came from the hill.

She started and tottered as the voice of Cyrus Johns rung out.

They turned toward it—the time had expired.

"Hallo, you fellows!" cried the voice. "Your time is up, but some of my men ain't satisfied—they want to give you until sunset. Majority rules in this outfit—you've got till sunset, and there it ends."

"Praise God!" shouted Jack, clasping her to his breast, while the young girl glowed with sudden relief. "Hurrah!"

"Look!" whispered the guide, in scarcely audible tones, to Duncan. "He's kissin' her, an' cryin' like a child."

"Let him!" snarled Duncan, with transfigured face; "let him, you old thief—let him!"

"She's got her arms around his neck," continued the guide, in a breathless state of excitement; "an' he's kissin' her an' cryin' like a child."

"Dead gone, my Christian friend—dead gone!" he shouted, dancing like a madman—"dead gone!"

CHAPTER XIV.

DOT'S INFLUENCE.

THE overjoyed friends did not know, though Pedro did, that the reprieve originated with his jovial guard. For some occult reason, he had busily harangued a majority of his fellows during the five minutes, and, such was his remarkable fluency of speech, he soon made it evident to them that a continuation of the time until sunset would be fair play, nothing more.

Thanks to his ready wit and shrewd, supple tongue, he triumphed in his strange desire, and was now, merrier than ever, guarding Pedro on the summit.

He told the Spaniard his name was Veach—Charles Veach, of Connecticut, a rich man. So were all of them, he said—every man of them was rich. He seemed in excellent spirits, and began a running fire of songs, jigs, hornpipes, and rather low anecdotes, to which Pedro listened and applauded, out of sheer gratitude, as his heart was heavy, notwithstanding his reprieve.

At an hour after sunrise five of the band mounted their horses and rode away toward the chaparral. Provisions had run low, and they were off in search of deer, antelope, or any worthy game which they might meet.

This left but six to guard the camp, which force, commanded by Cyrus Johns and assisted by his brutal lieutenant, Bill Moore, was considered amply sufficient. The three off duty—the two leaders and another man—scattered about, and finally, spreading a blanket on the hillside, a hundred yards south of the summit, began a game of poker, one dollar ante.

Pedro, talking with his merry guard, saw the game commence, and had he been at liberty, would have thirsted to join; but suppressing his passion, he watched the slow hands of the robbers as they moved over the cards on the blanket.

"There are the three best poker-players in the band, pard," remarked Veach. "Read character and faces—well, I should remark they can; and Cyrus Johns can almost tell what a man's got in his hand by looking at his face."

The game had commenced. The cards were shuffled out and dealt, the ante was deposited. A small pile of gold coin lay near each player's hand, slowly diminishing in size, as coin after coin was placed in the center.

Their tones were low and cool, and each player alternately eyed his companions' faces, the money, and his hand. The frequently recurring words, "I see, I raise, I call," were uttered in the same unvarying monotone. But they were betting heavily, and were so far occupied in watching their companions' faces and fingers, that at the expiration of an hour they did not notice that the hunters had disappeared in the distance.

But the guards did, and the other two had become intently interested in the game on the hillside below them. Casting a parting glance at the camp, they bade Veach "watch that greaser," and joined their companion gamblers, standing over them and intently watching the progress of the game.

The three players remarked the presence of the guards, but, betting heavily, had entirely forgotten that they were neglecting their duty. The lax guards presented their claims for admittance. The losers in the game—Cyrus Johns being winner—were glad of an opportunity to play against two mediocre gamblers; and soon two more men were sitting at the blanket, two more piles of gold shone under the cards, and two additional pairs of suspicious eyes were watching their antagonists.

Veach, for some reason, now became extremely jolly, and began to eulogize a certain dark-orbed damsel whom he said was awaiting his return in the Wooden Nutmeg State. Gliding from one feminine subject to another, in the fishy, gentle way males do, he remarked what a cursed pity it was that the boss cut up so about a girl. With that, he narrated what he knew of her adventure. Her capture by the band; her contempt and scorn of Cyrus Johns; her subsequent imprisonment, and final escape; and remarked, in conclusion, with a furtive glance at the gamblers, "it's a great piece of scoundrelly villainy to pepper you on her account, ain't it?"

Pedro thought it was. Veach continued, drawing his knife and whetting it rapidly on his boot:

"She's a right neat bit of a girl—too nice to live with Cyrus Johns."

Pedro did not know—he had not seen her.

Veach looked down into the gully where the friends were moving about from time to time, and suddenly said:

"I'm a peacemaker."

Pedro was glad to hear it. The robber filled his pipe, and firing it, handed it to Pedro, who gratefully thanked him. After watching him smoke for a few minutes, he again burst out in a low tone:

"I've got a sister back in Connecticut, Feleppy, and my eye! ain't she pretty. Now you wouldn't think, looking at me, that I could have a pretty sister, would you?"

He was a handsome, dashing fellow, this bandit, and as it would do no hurt, and might possibly be well to tell the truth, Pedro did—he thought it very likely.

The young fellow seemed gratified, and smoothed his brown mustache. "She's good!" he resumed; "she's good—and if any fellow dared to say anything against her, do you know what I'd do?"

"Kill him."

"Certainly; as quick as I could draw trigger. How a fellow will fight for his sister and mother—won't he?"

"Yes."

"More'n he will for a man, eh? You bet. Slander can't hurt a man much, but it ruins a woman."

He whetted his knife more rapidly now across his instep, and again stealthily glanced at the

gamblers. They were oblivious to everything except the game. Across the blanket gleamed cool and steady eyes, gazing their adversaries in the face. The muttered tones, the "see and raise," went the rounds of the circle, and the sparkling gold formed a ring of glitters as it was changed from the supply to the bet, from the stake to the winner.

The sun became hot, and the players doffed their coats, and pulling their flapping slouch hats over their eyes, went on with the game. Down in the camp, from time to time, Pedro received gestures of encouragement from his comrades, which he would fain answer, but could not loose his bonds. The heat arose in its liquid, shivering waves from the *meza*; the distant mountains purple-glistened in the south; and still the monotonous tones came from the circle of players, accompanied by the chink of gold: "I see, I raise, I call."

"I can't be bribed," whispered Veach, with a sunny smile; "none of us can—we are too rich, too rich. How do you like the tobacco?—it's my best; the stuff I smoke on loading days. Sweet, ain't it?"

It was villainous. "Si, senor, it is sweet and comforting."

"I thought so. Well, a rich man can afford to smoke good tobacco, can't he?"

"Si, senor."

"I like 'si' better than 'yes,' it's a softer word. Don't you think so, Feleppy?"

"Si, senor."

Veach caroled "Auld Lang Syne," cheerfully. "I like to sing that—it reminds me of home," he said. "Little black-eyes is there, and sister. Sister looks a heap like the girl yonder in your camp."

"Does she?"

"Si—which stands for 'yaw' in Dutch," and Veach dwelt on the Castilian monosyllable. "I say!" he added vehemently, "I can't be bribed, but if my sister was in yonder camp in the stead of the one that is there, do you know what I'd do?"

"You would fight for her."

"Until I died, or Cyrus Johns's gang had been thrashed!" and his eyes gleamed like coals.

"No, Feleppy, you can't bribe me," he said, after a pause; "for I'm too rich. But by—, Feleppy! I like my sister, and she looks a heap like her; and if 'twas my sister there, now, I'd fight our gang of scoundrels until I died."

Pedro applauded his brotherly love.

"Feleppy," he growled, with a snappish terror's every action, "I can't be bribed—don't think so."

"I know you cannot, senor."

"We call our sister Dot, though her name is Dorothea. Dot is a 'cute name, ain't it?"

What under the sun, thought Pedro, what is he driving at, with all his talk about his sister?

Veach again glanced furtively at the gamblers. They were buried in their game. Over the plain. It was bare.

"Who's winner?" he cried.

He was not heeded.

"Who's winner, I say?"

They did not hear him, and still the tones went round the circle; "I see, I raise—"

"Hallo! Hallo-o-o!"

Cyrus Johns started and looked up, but seeing his captive still under the supervision of Veach, again bent his eyes on the game. Veach chuckled in strange delight.

"Who's winner, Cyrus?"

"Me."

"What's the ante?"

"Five dollars."

"Whew-w! how much money's up?"

"Seven hundred and eighty, and I'll raise you fifty," he concluded, again intent upon the game.

Veach's eyes snapped like those of a ferret.

"They are excited, Feleppy."

"I see they are."

"They don't notice us—nothing short of an earthquake would rouse 'em."

"You are doubtless correct."

Veach stopped whetting his knife and felt its edge. "It's sharp," he said, and reaching forward drew the knife across the sinews that confined Pedro's ankles, easily severing them.

"Feleppy, give me my pipe, for it's all I've got, and I don't want you to carry it off. Now I'll free you, but I want you to sit still until I make the ends of the sinews look as if they had been broken. Will you do it?"

"Yes, senor," and a grateful look went out from Pedro's raven eyes. "Senor, if you ever want a friend—"

"That'll do," hurriedly whispered Veach. "I do it because she looks like Dot—not because I like you."

Pedro was free. But he waited as Veach tore the several ends of the sinews with his knife.

Another look at the gamblers. Still "I see, I raise," but no call as yet—the stake was now a thousand dollars, and every man had a good hand.

"Feleppy, tell her she looks like Dot, will you?"

"Yes, senor, my friend, I will."

"Now, Feleppy, I want you to lay down that pipe before you forget it, and bu'st me in the nose hard enough to draw the claret. Will you do it?"

"It will give you pain, my friend."

"No matter. I'll make Cyrus Johns believe you broke loose and knocked me down. Feleppy, I've favored you, now you do me a good turn—will you?"

"Yes."

"All right—you haven't laid down the pipe—Feleppy, don't go back on me and carry it off." And his liberator eyed him reproachfully. Pedro blushed, laid down the nasty pipe, and stealthily rose, eyeing the busy gamblers.

"Tell her I said she looks like my pretty sister Dot, will you?" earnestly urged Veach. "Will you be sure?"

"Quite sure, my friend."

"All right—blaze away—but don't hit too hard, Feleppy."

The brawny arm of the Spaniard shot unwillingly out from his shoulder and struck the other squarely in the nose, causing the blood to spurt over his face; then he was running rapidly down the hill toward camp, while Veach rolled on the ground.

The latter took some blood from the miniature torrent which gushed from his nose, and dashed it into both eyes, then sprung to his feet and discharged his gun over Pedro's head.

"Hurry!" he cried to his companions. "The greaser's bu'st loose."

At the report of his gun the gamblers looked up and saw that Pedro was gone! Then, leaving the game they grasped their guns and dashed to the top of the hill where Veach was discharging chamber after chamber of his revolver at Pedro, though a hundred yards over his head. But they arrived just in time to see the burly form of Pedro disappear headlong into the gully—safe.

"Curse you for a fool!" screamed Cyrus Johns, in an ecstasy of rage. "He's gone, has he?" and he struck the man a heavy blow.

Veach reeled and staggered, pressing his hands to his face.

"He knocked thunder out of Veachy," remarked Bill Moore. "I'll bet his nose is broke in a dozen places."

"Yes," returned Veach. "And if the infernal blood hadn't got into my eyes so I couldn't see to shoot, I'd 'a' dropped that cursed greaser in two seconds—blast his dirty hide!"

CHAPTER XV.

A BATTLE WITH KNIVES.

PEDRO had scarcely received the congratulations of his friends, when the robbers on the summit, enraged at his escape, charged down upon them, shouting like demons. Pedro, having no gun, was given a revolver by the overjoyed guide—a weapon he could wield with accuracy and rapidity. Running his eye over the coming robbers, he noticed that they numbered but five. One was missing, and that one was Veach. Casting his gaze again to the summit, he saw that merry bandit spring upon a horse, and striking spurs to the animal, gallop swiftly in a southerly direction.

"Ha!" thought Pedro. "He has repented his good already, and has gone to bring up the remainder of the band."

But the young bandit had not. Disgusted and ashamed of his connection with the villains, he had taken this opportunity to desert, and was even now speeding toward the Colorado River.

Pedro was brought to a sense of the coming danger by the rifle reports of his three companions, and one of his quondam captors reeled, halted, then fell with a terrible curse, with his life blood staining the ground. The others barely paused to ascertain his condition, then seeing he was past human aid, pressed on anew with rifles ready and knives drawn, intent on butchery.

"Scuttle behind the breastwork, boys!" commanded Jack. "They'll let us have a volley before they try the steel."

His command was obeyed none too soon; for even while he spoke the bandits halted and took a hasty aim. But Jack's forethought had spoiled their intention—as the report rung out, the

last man, Duncan, was just disappearing behind the bank.

"We cannot trust to revolvers, senor," calmly said Pedro, sheathing his and drawing a knife which Duncan had given him. "When they appear on the brink we will have no chance to shoot, but we must meet them with cold steel."

During the day, by Jack's command, the breastwork of blankets, which had been used above, had been increased in size by the boughs of adjacent dwarf-oaks and soil from the banks, making a sort of rampart, supported by the tent, in which sat the young girl. This fortification was about three feet in height by seven or eight in length. Behind it stood the four comrades, each with drawn knife, braced to receive the coming shock.

Jack had taken particular pains to place himself at such a point where he could render prompt assistance to Kate, in case she should require it, swelling with a warrior's lofty pride in combat, and burning to meet the villains that had maltreated her. Beside him stood the colossal Spaniard, coolly drawing his finger along the edge of his keen knife. Next was Duncan, in an agony of nervousness and excitement, but wildly desiring the combat; and last was Simpson, quietly chewing his tobacco and keeping his eyes fixed upon the bank above, awaiting the attack.

It came. Four burly forms appeared for a second on the brink, with four inflamed and ferocious faces glaring down upon the comrades; then the robbers plunged headlong on the rampart below—it had come, hand to hand.

The foremost robber was the lieutenant, Bill Moore, and, plunging down over the breastwork, fell heavily upon Pedro, who struck at him with his knife. But as he did so his foot slipped, destroying his aim, and the burly form of Moore, like a colossal bird, struck him heavily, felling him to the ground.

The shock, while it dazed Pedro for a moment, was equally disadvantageous to his opponent, for his bended knee struck the barrier in his wild descent, doubling it under his body, and causing a thrill of intense pain to dart through his entire system. Had not this pain rendered him for the moment incapable of proceeding with his bloody design, in all probability Pedro would have been dispatched at once; however, both men recovered their faculties at nearly the same instant, both lying on the ground, Pedro beneath.

The latter's first act was to glance hurriedly about for his knife. It had been struck from his hand by the shock, and was nowhere visible. He thought of his revolvers—he could not reach them; they being closely compressed between his body and that of the ranger.

Moore saw his adversary's entire lack of weapons, and raising his knife, aimed for a brief moment, then sent it on its errand of blood. But he had been too precise, too cool; for in the short space of time in which he had paused to perfect his aim, Pedro grasped his wrist with his powerful hand, and clutching it firmly, arrested the course of the knife.

One hand being balked, the robber quickly shifted his knife to the other, but was prevented in the same manner. A gleam of malevolency swept over and about his sensual face, and his wicked little eyes peered down into Pedro's, which glowed hotly back.

Now commenced the struggle. Pedro was the superior in point of strength and prowess, but he was forced to exert all his strength to imprison his enemy's arms. His adversary was also strong and active, and it required all the Spaniard's power to confine the limbs which were twisting fiercely in wild attempts to tear themselves free; but Pedro was fully alive to the importance of keeping them confined, and he exerted all his powers in that procedure.

But he was well aware the struggle could not last long, for he was wasting his strength, while his enemy was not; he knew his fingers, though possessing great muscle, must soon cramp, and then—

He knew the result and changed his tactics. Watching his opportunity, he suddenly loosed his right hand, and as quickly slid it up and grasped the knife. This act was wholly unlooked-for by the bandit, and his grasp of the knife was slight in consequence of the compression of his wrist; and with a violent effort, Pedro wrested the blade away.

He did not pause to search for the most vital place in which to strike—he knew the importance of striking quickly; and drawing back the trenchant blade he forced it into his adversary's cheek. A cry of pain followed the blow, and in agony the robber clutched Pedro's throat,

fiercely, with his freed hand. But he soon loosened his grip, for Pedro, suddenly withdrawing his left hand, forced the robber's head back, and with another and fiercer blow, he plunged the knife into the bronzed throat.

The clutch on Pedro's throat loosened, and the blood dabbled upon his face as his enemy's head swayed, nodded, a film came over his eyes, and gulping up large quantities of blood, he rolled over on the ground dead.

Pedro arose, cast a look upon his prostrate, vanquished foe, and abandoning the bloody knife, possessed himself of his own, which lay at a short distance. Then he was ready for another scuffle, for his blood was up.

A robber lay under the breastwork, cut and gashed about the face and breast, dead. Beyond, leaning against the perpendicular bank, was a sturdy ruffian cutting and thrusting, closely set upon by Duncan and the guide.

"They've got him," he thought, as he saw the robber was badly wounded, and was rapidly sinking; "they don't need me there—where are Cimarron Jack and Johns?"

He heard a scuffling noise within the tent, and a piercing female scream rung out. He sprang toward the entrance; they were inside, these muscular, well-matched men, fighting with the full force of their fiery natures. He burst inside, and at a glance saw the situation was a desperate one for his friend.

Prostrate in the further corner lay the young girl, shrieking with fear and wringing her hands. Over her stood Cimarron Jack, with uplifted knife, endeavoring to elude a clubbed rifle which Johns was brandishing over his head.

Jack had evidently been felled by that same weapon, for his head was laid open, and his face was streaming with blood. But drawn up like a bear at bay, with eyes flashing angrily, he was endeavoring to avoid the brandished gun, and slip into the robber with his knife.

But the latter had every advantage. Standing as far back as the small tent would permit him, he raised the heavy rifle, and swung it down with sweeping force upon his antagonist. Jack dodged and partially evaded the blow, otherwise it would have slain him instantly; but the butt of the gun descended upon the side of his head, opening another and greater gash; and, helpless, the young giant fell senseless.

The young girl shrieked again in terror. The muscular Spaniard darted forward, and roused to towering rage at seeing his companion bleeding on the ground, plunged his knife into the back of the bandit, who half-turning toppled and fell forward almost in Pedro's arms. With a snort of rage the Don spurned the body from him, and rushed from the tent to aid his comrades in their work.

But, once outside he was confronted by Kit and Simpson.

"The way is clear, here, pard," the guide explained, seeing Pedro's fierce mood; "every one of the cusses is wiped out. Is Jack hurt?" he asked, anxiously.

"He's badly hurt, but I think not dangerously," and Pedro explained the struggle. "You know these cuts on the head soon heal and I should not be surprised if he was even now on his feet."

The guide passed by him and entered the tent, but soon returned. His face was grave, and his whole manner expressed the liveliest concern.

Was Jack dead?

They noted his grave face, and feared he was the bearer of bad news. Taking each of them by the arm and placing himself between them, he led them some distance away, then halted, and said, in a semi-whisper:

"She's got his head in her lap, an' she's wipin' the blood from his face, an' she's done up his head with her handkerchief, an' she's a-kissin' of him in the face, an' a-callin' of him 'Dear John.' Dead gone, my Christian friend—dead gone."

"What, dead—is he indeed dead?" demanded Pedro, starting toward the tent.

The guide shook his head, and detained him.

"I see'd him open his eyes, an' I see'd her kiss his hand, an' he grinned, an' she mused him around, an' kept a-callin' of him 'Dear John, my preserver.' An' sez he, 'I ain't much hurt, love' (jest twig that—love), and then she cried harder, and called of him, 'My hero, my hero!' Dead gone, my Christian friend—dead gone."

"She didn't say 'Dead gone, my Christian friend,' did she?" snapped Duncan. "I never did see a feller so keardless in his talk."

The guide paid no attention to him.

"An' when I kim out she had her arms round him, like a bear, an' a-whisperin' in his ear."

An' she bent her head down so he could kiss her!" said the guide, as if he did not expect to be believed. "Yes, sir, she did. I declar—I'm 'most beat out with sech goin's-on."

Pedro smiled.

"Since he is in such good care, it will be better for us to leave him alone, will it not?"

"Of course," replied the guide. "I'm goin' back on Cimarron Jack, sence he's got to be sech a fool. Why, he's dead gone—he is, for a fact."

Acting upon Pedro's motives of delicacy, they did not enter the tent, feeling satisfied that their comrade was not badly hurt, and that he was in a fair way for recovery. The corpses of the slain bandits filled them with disgust; and taking the ones that were scattered about, they conveyed them several furlongs down the ravine, and abandoned them to the fangs of the carnivorous animals.

This done, the rampart was rebuilt in a more substantial manner; the rifles were reloaded, and Pedro went into the tent to withdraw the body of the bandit chief.

Jack was asleep, with his head comfortably bandaged. Near him was his nurse, looking so sweetly conscious that Pedro stared.

"I can see a wedding not far off," slyly whispered the sagacious veteran to himself; "and it is my opinion the expedition will cease here."

As he was drawing the body out of the entrance he stumbled over his nugget, which was lying in the door. As he picked it up, he uttered a cry of surprise, as he saw two initials cut into it, which he had failed to perceive before—"C. V."

He was grievously disappointed. He had been dreaming of unearthing vast wealth from the hill, only to be sorely tumbled from his castle in the air.

The initials proved the nugget to have been in the possession of another, and it might have been carried a thousand miles for aught he knew.

He sighed, as his dream of gold vanished into nothingness, and was only consoled by the possession of the nugget, which might be of considerable value.

The body of Johns was thrown among those of his criminal companions; Duncan, snarling and pragmatical, busied himself in cooking a late dinner; and Pedro and the guide, lighting their pipes, began to smoke the intervening time away, keeping the hill summit under their gaze, awaiting the return of the absent rangers, which they expected every moment.

In the mean time, Jack, while rapidly regaining his health, related his history to his fair and attentive nurse, who hovered over him in sweet watchfulness. He had come from one of the oldest and wealthiest of South Carolina's proud families. He had received a liberal education, and after graduating, had entered upon the pursuit which he was passionately fond of, and in which he gave high promise of future fame—painting. But, with the susceptibility of genius, he had become, a few years ago, enamored of a proud Georgian beauty, who coqueted with him for a while, and then scornfully cast him off.

This was more than his proud spirit could bear. Abandoning his family name (Worthington) for one less patrician, he had fled to the frontier, where he joined a party of emigrants en route for Santa Fe. While on the Cimarron Fork, they were attacked by a large band of Indians and renegade whites, bent upon plunder.

He fought fiercely, scarcely caring whether he lived or died, and it was mainly due to his prowess that the plunderers were at last repulsed, after a severe loss on both sides.

The combat is known to this day by the name of "The Battle of the Cimarron," and here was bestowed on him the *sobriquet* of Cimarron Jack, a name which he had in future borne, causing it to be known throughout the Southwest.

He had himself (he said, with a blush) contracted the habit of vaunting purposely, to keep his thoughts from wandering to the scornful beauty he had left behind; but now he said, there was no longer any necessity for vaunts, for a single glance at her sweet face—

The cook, poking his head inside to announce dinner, surprised the young giant in the act of imprinting an ardent kiss upon the hand of his lovely nurse, and such was the modesty of Kate and the sheepishness of Jack, that some little time elapsed before they obeyed the summons.

During dinner, Jack was the recipient of numberless congratulations upon his speedy recovery, mingled with sly hints as to the predominating cause, all of which Kate blushed

prettily thereat, and Jack, as is usual with young men similarly placed, relapsed into a state of semi-imbecility.

CHAPTER XVI.

CAPTURED AT LAST.

THE dinner had been finished but a short time, and the men, drawing back from the uncomfortably warm fire, were puffing their pipes with the quietude and self-satisfaction born of a well-lined stomach, when the cook, who had resumed his pugnacious grumbling, suddenly cried:

"Tear every stitch out of my boots, but thar comes the ghost!"

The men sprung to their feet, and the young girl, not cognizant of the Phantom Rider's shadow-existence, glanced timidly about her.

Across the southern plain, and riding directly toward them, galloped a steed that Pedro and Duncan well knew—the chestnut horse, and on his back was the Phantom Rider. A short distance in his rear, galloped a horseman, evidently in hot pursuit. This horseman was small in proportions, and was plying the spur rapidly, urging on his straining horse.

On flew the chestnut steed, bearing directly upon them, though nearly a mile away; on came the slender horseman, plying both spurs.

"He is chased!" cried Pedro.

"And by a ranger," added the guide. "Shall we hide and pepper him as he goes by, Pedro?"

"Stay a moment—I think I know him."

He shaded his eyes with his hand, and peered closely at the pursuer.

"It is as I thought," he said. "It is Veach—there is none so small as he in the party."

"The feller that let yer loose?"

"The same. See, he is waving—he is signaling; what does he mean?"

He was a mile distant, and the flying Rider was a hundred yards or more in advance of him. Taking off his hat, the former waved it violently over his head, as if to attract attention, and as they were the only men in the vicinity of the hill, he must be desirous of attracting their notice. In answer, Pedro sprang upon the bank, and doffing his sombrero, swung it rapidly over his head.

At this the gestures of Veach—for it was he—became more violent. His hat now described shorter and quicker circles, and he appeared to be standing in his stirrups.

"What does he mean?" inquired Pedro. "He wants us to do something, that is sure. What can he mean?"

That he wanted something was evident; for while he dashed the spurs against his horse, he waved his hat more frantically, and every moment the chase drew nearer.

"I will saddle my horse, at any rate," said Pedro; "so if he wants me to help him, I will be ready to do it. Mind, now, Tim," he said, as he set about his task, "don't fire at him—he's friendly."

The guide assented.

The speed and yet nicety with which Spaniards can saddle and bridle horses is marvelous to novices. This one was an accomplished equestrian, and in an incredibly brief space he was mounted and riding out of the gully.

But now the gestures of Veach had ceased, and he was no longer visible on his horse.

Had he fallen? No; they would have seen him. Was his saddle empty? No; they could still see his swinging legs as he regularly spurred.

But he was bending over his horse's neck then, for his form was not visible.

The chase drew nearer. The chestnut horse galloped wildly, and was drawing close, closer at every bound. All of the party felt a strange interest in the chase, a wild desire to solve the mystery of the Phantom Rider.

Each man took his gun, resolving to aim steadily, and if possible empty the saddle of the chestnut horse, though they had no expectation of so doing.

Duncan was wildly excited, and was as nervous as he could well be without bursting an artery, while the guide and young Worthington anxiously awaited the approach of the chase.

Veach still remained invisible; what was he doing? His gestures had some time before ceased, not to be renewed, and he no longer stood in his stirrups.

"It's very strange, comrades," remarked Pedro, sitting on his horse above them. "He evidently wishes us to do something, but he no longer waves."

"He has his hands at his horse's head," he resumed, directly. "I can plainly see his arms. He is at work there. Ha! he is loosing his lariat."

Pedro was correct; the bandit was loosing his halter from the neck of his horse, for the next moment he appeared in his seat, waving wildly: this time with his halter in his hand.

"He wants you to lariat the ghost, Pedro," said the guide, excitedly; "that's what he wants."

It was exactly what he did desire.

Pedro quickly took his coiled *riata* from the saddle-horn, and showed it to his horse.

The well-trained animal understood the motion, and fastened his eyes on the Phantom Rider, now a quarter of a mile away. Pedro turned to his companion.

"Three times I have tried to lasso yonder horseman, and three times I have been balked. Senors, if I fail this time, he is, indeed, not of this world."

On came the chestnut horse, like the wind, with his strange rider—on came Veach, having ceased his gesticulations.

Pedro again turned to his companion, and for the first and last time in his life, boasted.

"Senor, I am the very best caster of the *riata* in Mexico; I am famous. My horse is the best trained for that purpose in the country; and, if I miss now, the horse and rider are ghosts."

In his right hand he took his *riata*, and slipped the noose to about three feet in diameter. The noble black horse pranced slightly, then was a block, carved, fixedly watching the coming horseman.

They watched with intense interest.

Nearer came the chestnut horse, bearing straight down upon them, while the Mexican and his horse were like a statue. The Phantom Rider evinced no intention of veering and sweeping up the hill; if he did, Pedro would have a difficult task; but on he came, dashing madly, and he was now so close they could hear the horse breathe, short and heavily.

Pedro raised his *riata*. The black horse braced himself, preparing to dart forward when the coil left his master's hand.

Nearer came the Phantom Rider, closer; he was close by; still Pedro sat quietly.

Nearer—still nearer—he was nearly opposite, twenty yards away.

Pedro whirled the *riata* over his head, while the black horse, quivering with excitement, prepared to spring. Once—twice—thrice—four times, and—whirl!

Away went the lasso like a darting serpent, toward the neck of the chestnut horse. In the gully they held their breath with anxiety, and Veach, behind, reined in.

When the coil left the Spaniard's hand, his horse sprang forward like an arrow. The lasso spun out its spiral length—longer—still further away—it is descending—it is over the neck of the chestnut horse. "Hurrah!"

The black horse, as he saw the noose encircle its victim's neck, halted suddenly and braced himself. The noose settled—tighter—a shock—and the chestnut horse was rolling over on the ground, over and over his rider.

"Captured—caught! hurrah, hurrah!" and the gully echoed again and again. Veach, behind, took up the cry, and came dashing up. "Well done, hurrah! Three cheers for Felipe!"

They were given hastily. The friends rushed out of the gully and crowded about the captured horse as he arose, half-choked and gasping for breath. But he arose without his rider—there he lay on the ground, scowling up at them from the horrible face beneath the flapping hat.

While Jack held the plunging horse, and Pedro, hand over hand, came up over his lasso, the rest, charged with curiosity, bent over the prostrate rider, and the same cry came from all, simultaneously:

"A dead man!"

He was a corpse!

Sternly, yet with vague distrust, they shook him slightly, and pressed his body between their hands. It was cold and stiff—beyond all doubt he was dead.

Assisted by Veach they took off his *poncha*. Underneath that garment was a vest, drab in color, and of American make. Next came a woolen shirt. Tearing this open, they found a small dark spot on the breast, at the heart; it was a bullet-hole.

The dry, hot air of the Southwest is as efficacious for a few months, in the preservation of dead bodies, as the process of embalming—they wither, wrinkle, become brown, and then retain their substance for some months. Knowing this, and noting the scaly, dried blood upon the bullet-hole, they were satisfied he had perished months before.

Indeed, they were assured of this, for they met with that which explained the mystery.

He had been bound to his saddle securely—thongs around his legs and on the saddle showed that to be the case. They had been broken by the sudden shock. In his head and face they found no less than five bullet-holes, proving conclusively that Duncan and Pedro had aimed correctly, as had the rangers when they gave him a volley. In one of his cavalry boots was a silver-mounted pistol, which they abstracted. In the other was a long knife. Drawing this out, they perceived it transfixed a shred of white paper. This they withdrew and unfolded, and the following met their view, written in a rough, unpracticed hand, with blood:

"RIVER GILA, 1849.—Here is the body of John Griffin, who murdered his father for gold. He met his reward. All murderers take warning."

"APACHE JACK."

They well knew the signer, all except Duncan and Kate. He was an honest man and far-famed scout; and in the absence of justice, he had executed the solemn command of God, which let no man dare abridge: "Eye for eye, tooth for tooth, blood for blood."

They cast the parricide from them, and taking the chestnut horse, went back to the camp. The Phantom Rider was a mystery, a ghost, no longer.

Our tale is ended, and the exploration of the Colorado River also; for the next morning Cimarron Jack, or John Worthington, as it is best he should be called, stepped forward, and called for volunteers to escort him and Miss Sandorn to the States, where, if it pleased Providence, they were to be married, when her term of mourning for her father had expired. Every man volunteered, Veach among the rest.

The latter stated he had met the five rangers who had left the main body, and they had informed him they had deserted—they cared not to expose their bodies to the aim of crack marksmen to indulge a whim of Cyrus Johns'. As for himself, he had been on his way to California, but meeting with the strange horseman, he had determined to ferret out the mystery, and gave chase. We know the result.

He identified the nugget as his own, the initials being those of his name—Charles Veach. He was rich, he said—rich as a miser; and was going back to see Dot, and marry Black-eyes in the little old Wooden-Nutmeg State. And he reeled off a lively hornpipe in anticipation.

The chestnut horse proved to be an invaluable animal; gentle, and suitable for a lady's steed, notwithstanding he had so long carried such a degraded burden; and the pack-saddle was metamorphosed into a side-saddle, so Kate could ride on the homeward journey.

A supply of provisions was cooked; by noon of the next day they were in the saddle; and a year later, Duncan and Veach witnessed the marriage of John Worthington and Miss Sandorn at Worthington Elms, in South Carolina, and enjoyed the privilege of kissing the bride.

Pedro and the guide have settled for life in Mexico, where they smoke and chat away their quiet lives in peace, recounting their thrilling adventures in the days of the "forties." And here end the adventures of Pedro Felipe and his comrades.

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